Number 62 $6

Asian Cult Cinema

Tokyo Core Police vs Chanbara Beauty

Intended for Mature Readers

INSIDE

LEE KANG-SHENG interview
ONG BAK 2
Hong Kong SEX Industry
NINJA VIXENS
New Wave of KOREAN Cinema

PLUS

PAWEEN PURIKITPANYA interview
SHOCHIKU's Horror Cinema
RED CLIFF

AND MUCH MORE

62
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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

ACC REPORT: FILM, NEWS AND GOSSIP FROM ASIA
by Thomas Weisser 3

THE KOREAN DREAM MACHINE IS ACTIVATED
by Tom Piccirilli 4

CAPSULE REVIEWS
by Thomas Weisser and Archie Cole 12

FOREIGN CRIMES: Red Cliff Razzberries
column by Max Allan Collins 14

SHOCHIKU'S HORROR FILMS OF THE 1960s
by J L Carrozza 16

NINJA VIXENS: A BOX OF ROCKS by Jerry White 20

HELP ME EROS a review by Ard Vijn 24

LEE KANG-SHENG interview
by Ard Vijn and Peter van der Lugt 28

ONG BAK 2 by Stefan S 37

HONG KONG SEX INDUSTRY:
Two by Herman Yau by Tony Williams 41

RIC AND INFAMOUS: Mercury Man, Painted Skin, Ip Man, Champions, Legendary Assassin, Black Belt
column by Ric Meyers 55

PAWEEN PURIKITPANYA interview
conducted by Patrick Van Hauwaert 47

TRASH TAKEN SERIOUSLY by Dr Stan Glick 52

GORED TO DEATH: Chanbara Beauty vs Tokyo Gore Police by Bradley DeWitt 55

Front Cover: Aya from *Chanbara Beauty* & Ruka from *Tokyo Gore Police (pg 55)* design by Yuko Mihara Weisser; ***Back Cover:*** Yin Shin from *Help Me Eros (pg 24)*

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER (You gotta know what's in the Book): Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd *(etc)*," is well known. Other psalms dealing with 'shepherd and his sheep' don't enjoy the same notoriety. For example, from Psalm 44: "God, you gave us up to be devoured like sheep. You sold your people for a pittance." Or Psalm 74: "Why have you rejected us forever O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?" Hmm. Not so uplifting, eh?

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ACC Contents

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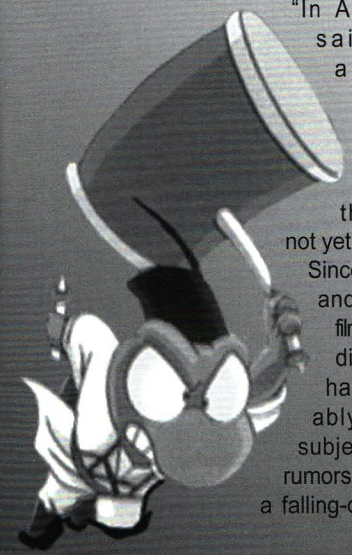
Asian Cult Cinema REPORT

by Thomas Weisser — FILM, NEWS and GOSSIP

The big news this quarter is the release of ***Tony Jaa***'s **Ong Bak 2**. You'll find a critique by ACC's Stefan S. inside this issue (page 35). But perhaps the bigger story is the drama which unfolded around the shooting of this film, specifically Tony Jaa's meltdown.

Details are still sketchy but, months ago, the Thai press claimed that he walked off the set before the film was completed. In fact, according to a published article last July, he had vanished from the project two months prior – never to return – with only 75% of the shoot completed. **Prachya Pinkaew**, the director of the original **Ong Bak**, was tapped to finish the job. Although the studio does not deny this report, **Akarapol Techaratanaprasert** (the son of executive producer) did issue a statement in ***Thai Rath***: "Jaa didn't disappear... he asked for time away to contemplate martial-arts movies and stunts for the film's big ending climactic scenes."

But conflicting stories have surfaced. Among them: Jaa, who was not only starring in but also directing **Ong Bak 2**, left the project amid an avalanche of money problems. According to **Somsak Techaratanaprasert**, an executive at ***Sahamongkol Film International***, the movie had been budgeted at 100 million baht ($2.8 million US). "In April 2008," he said, "Jaa had already spent 300 million ($8.5 million US) and major scenes [like the finale] had not yet been shot."



Since the completion and release of the film, (rumored post-director) Pinkaew has been remarkably quiet on the subject. A year ago, rumors were flying over a falling-out between him and Jaa, apparently over Jaa's decision to direct **Ong Bak 2**. But now, in the aftermath of the film's release, Pinkaew has made no statement. Some critics [including our own Stefen S] are complaining over the seemingly "unfinished" final product. Some reviewers claim this is the result of Jaa never completing the film and refusing to return to the project under Pinkaew's hand.

Among the more bizarre stories surrounding this entire caper is one that appeared in *Bangkok of the Mind* which claimed that Tony Jaa had retreated to the Thai jungles where he has turned his back on his former lifestyle and has since become involved in black magic.

In late 2008, Jaa's friend and mentor **Panna Rittikrai** went looking for him, checking many of his "meditation caves." Although he searched for many weeks, Rittikrai found no sign of Jaa. In the meantime, Tony's family in Surin Province said "the boy is okay" and had spent some time with them during Buddhist Lent (Summer 2008). They denied the black magic accusations.

Before the February release of the film, a reporter from *Thai Rath* met with Jaa at an unidentified "safe house." The newspaper published a photo (see below) showing Jaa clutching a bundle of financial documents. In the short interview, Jaa claimed the studio had driven him to poverty. Further, he says that he has merely sought out a quiet place to figure out his future and solve his problems. When asked about the completed **Ong Bak 2**, Jaa had no comment. ☑

Tony Jaa at a "safe house" somewhere in Thailand

Thanks to *Thai Rath* and *Bangkok of the Mind*

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จา-พนม ยีรัมย์ พระเอกนักบู๊ที่ โด่งดังจาก หนัง เรื่อง

Okay, brothers and sisters, I'm here to tell you that your favorite ginzo Uncle Pic has just come off a marathon weekend of watching a plethora of hardcore Korean crime & horror flicks, and his pulse is still drumming. Jesus, where's my blood pressure pills? I mean, these people are some of the most stylish, insightful, imaginative, and blood-happy folks you might find making movies for your own sick enjoyment. And when a Sicilian is in awe of somebody else's capacity for violence, you know you're talking about some seriously bent brutality. I mean, hell, these people surely do love their claw-hammers!

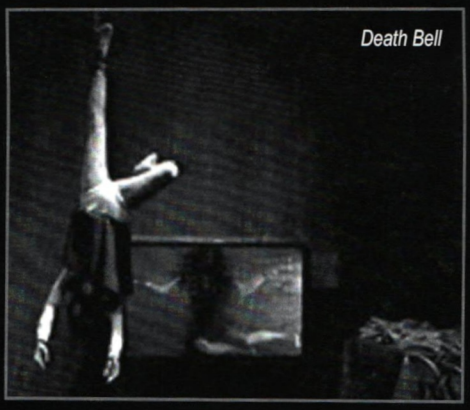
We were all blown away by the chilling **Tale of Two Sisters** and the pervy twists of **Oldboy** (oh yeah, what'd I say about hammers?). We all dug the genuine feel of a family underfoot a daikaju in **The Host**. **R-Point** despite its flaws, still rocked our ghost world. But what's been happening since? Well, you know you can't delve into these dark arenas without having to deal with a serial killer or three. So listen up and prepare to be schooled in seven new Korean releases that are just starting to pop up on our shores.

First out of the box is **Hansel and Gretel**, ***Yim Pil-Sung***'s retelling of the grisly fairy tale. This time out our story follows a man who's become lost in a forest after a minor auto accident. Deep in the woods he discovers a picture-perfect cottage and meets with a seemingly flawless family. Mom, dad, and the three kids seem to have the quaint storybook life that we all dream about. But it isn't long before our weary traveler discovers that he's a hostage, and that mom and dad have been dispatched by the kids so that he can be their new father. Even when he manages to escape, he can't leave the mystical forest and is continuously pulled back to the house. Clearly, some bad mojo is at work.

This is a beautifully staged version of the story, full of mystery and magical moments that allude to greater darkness abounding. Like most kids, our trio are quick on the emotional trigger. They want what they want when they want it, and they'll throw tantrums if they don't get it. But in their case, a tantrum can be lethal.

Hansel
and
Gretel
the
KOREAN DREAM
MACHINE
is ACTIVATED
by Award Winning Novelist
TOM PICCIRILLI

Hansel and Gretel


Death Bell

Really, this is an updated version of ***Jerome Bixby***'s tale **It's a Good Life**, made into a classic ***Twilight Zone*** episode starring ***Billy Mumy*** as the kid with the power to control everybody and everything. The production values are rich and the sets are resplendent and inspired. The movie is gorgeous even when the atmosphere begins to creep towards horror. Because of the lushness, the underpinning sadistic flashbacks in the last third of the film are that much more stark and bleak. Trust me, the heartfelt performances and intense ending will have you hugging your kids close.

Debut director ***Chang***'s **Death Bell** proved to be one of Korea's biggest horror hits of all time. Here we return to the popular sub-genre of *"high school hell"* that's got a little of everything from **Whispering Corridors** to **Battle Royale** thrown into it. Most notably though, the proverbial blind man on a galloping horse couldn't fail to see that the real influence at work here are the **Saw** films.

When the top twenty students from a high school class are chosen to represent their school for some kind of super-brain exam, the pressure is on. Along with a handful of faculty they meet for extra studies on the weekend. But when the classroom TV turns itself on and shows a missing student trapped in a rigged water tank, they're given instructions by a mysterious voice to solve a complex math problem drawn on the side of the tank. Get it right, the girl lives. Make a mistake, she dies. And of course, this is just the first deadly test. More will be coming. As the traps become more hideous and the test problems more difficult, you can guess that the bodies pile up left and right.

Like with the **Saw** films, the kills here are fiendish, filmed with a lot of flash and grue,

Death Bell

Rough Cut

Kim Ki-Duk's *Dream*

and well-edited to keep the suspense factor high. With some of the students all but losing their minds, there's a number of arresting and creepy visuals that toss in a potential supernatural element as we have dream sequences full of ***JuOn***-ish zombies and at least one nutty kid seeing the ghost of a dead girl who may or may not be the impetus for the whole grueling ordeal. Shocks, jump-scares, and imaginative sadistic tortures are in high number, but more importantly there are a lot of clever, slick, and even poignant twists as we try to figure out who our tormenter might be and exactly what the hell his problem is.

Bi-Mong *aka* **Dream** is ***Kim Ki-duk***'s latest mood-drenched masterpiece, his fifteenth, following the likes of **The Isle**, **Bad Guy**, and **Samaritan Girl**. When a Japanese man (**Jo Odagiri**) dreams that he causes a car crash while chasing his ex-girlfriend he awakens with such a bad feeling that he visits the scene of the supposed accident and finds that it's actually occurred. Traffic surveillance cameras give the police a suspect: a Korean woman known for her bouts of sleepwalking. Apparently the man and woman have a deep psychic connection – whatever he dreams, she lives out. If Jo's subconscious is feeling particularly frisky and he makes love to his ex in a dream, the woman will hunt down her own ex for a nocturnal fling. The film follows the troubled pair's attempts to circumvent their dilemma by sleeping in shifts, handcuffing themselves to each other, and doing their damnedest to stay awake, which includes a little self-mutilation.

Although there is a good deal more dialogue here than is usually found in Ki-duk films, there are long stretches when our cast deals with their troubles, fears, and of course, dreams in silence. In keeping with Kim Ki-duk's other efforts, there is a vibrant mixture of hope, heartache, and tragedy in **Dream**, along with enough surreal touches and symbol-laden scenes to keep audiences puzzling out the pieces long after the end credits roll. It's the kind of thing we've come to expect from Kim and we wouldn't want any other kind of movie from him anyway.

Writer/director ***Hun Jang***'s **Rough Cut** follows an action star with a bad temper who keeps beating the hell out of his fellow performers until nobody wants to work with him anymore. After starting some trouble in a restaurant he meets a fan who turns out to be a local mobster who once had a cameo in a small film. Eventually, with the fate of his movie and career on the line, he asks the mob tough to co-star with him. The gangster agrees under one condition– all the fighting has to be real.

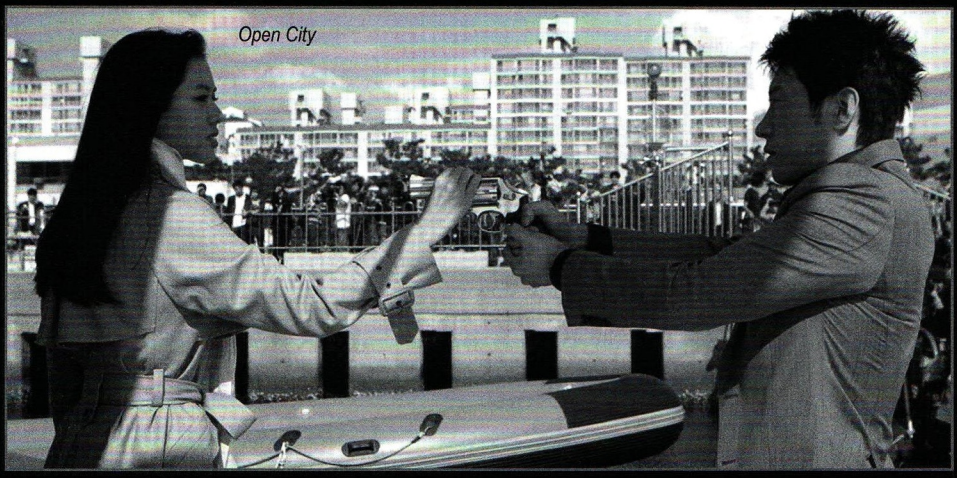
Our Town

Our Town

Hung-jan excels at showing how the lives of these men overlap as they try to discover their own true identities. How much of a tough guy persona is real and how much of it is bravado? How much of it is merely a pose and assimilated from action films? As the two men drift into each other's spheres and try out their new personalities of actor/criminal criminal/actor they come to form a tenuous friendship. And as their comprehension of each other grows we know that their newfound understanding can only lead to another extended all-in, slap-down, drag-out, *yo-mama's-a-ho* kickass fight.

Next up is ***Jeong Gil-yeong***'s **Our Town**, a powerful and intricately told exploration into the psychological complexities of three men whose lives are entwined in harrowing ways that they eventually come to understand. Here we have a serial killer who strings up women in parks and schoolyards, the cop with a past who is hunting him, and the cop's best friend, an aspiring writer who thinks that by involving himself deeper into the case he might be able to finish his novel entitled, oh what else, ***Serial Killer***. Through a series of flashbacks we see how small mistakes and explosive moments or anger and stupidity eventually wreak devastating consequences for all involved. As the investigation continues we learn more and more details of their unfortunate connections and discover that certain preconceived notions are derailed in several *"not all is as it seems"* turns of plot.

Even as the depth of the relationships between our three principals comes into focus, with their hidden traumas and backstories, the story tightens like a noose fastening them together even as we become


Open City

more absorbed in the film. Mysterious, haunting, and with enough confidence to unfurl information with a slow elegance, **Our Town** is an almost lyrical attempt to understand how every awful action can come back decades later to settle a blood debt.

Open City by writer/director ***Lee Sang-ki*** deals with the world of pickpockets, not an area of crime that we generally associate with violence and murder. But hoo boy, this is like the **French Connection** without the escargot, brother. You've got an obsessed cop willing to take it to the max to bring down the leader of a pickpocket ring, who just happens to be the mega-hot-babe (**Son Ye-jin**) who's always flirting with him. Our cop has good reason to hate pickpockets. His own Mom shamed the family when she was tossed in the bin for almost twenty years. And guess who she was best friends with in prison? That's right, our manipulative hottie. Now that Mom is out she wants only to go straight, but our hottie needs one more ace pickpocket to round out her team as they prepare to make a major score.

Open City is reminiscent of film noir. We've got our femme fatale with her claws in our hero, we've got an ex-con trying to go straight even while the bent life keeps pulling her back in, and we've got loads of unresolved issues where family members simply can't forgive and let go of the past. Add to that a real education on the world of pickpockets as we watch them pull scams and schemes with well-oiled aplomb. Nice action choreography and some bloody knife fights really up the grab factor and keep you glued to your seat. And have I mentioned that Son Ye-jin is gorgeous? You'd pay full ticket price to watch her grout her kitchen tile.

Na Hong-jin's **The Chaser** follows a former dirty cop turned pimp who suspects two of his girls have run out on him. Turns out they both had dates with the same client – one who is currently meeting with another of his girls that very night. From that point on, you're thrown into full-on action film with subtle stepping stones into psychological thriller territory as our *"hero"* chases down a psycho killer. Realistic fight scenes ensue

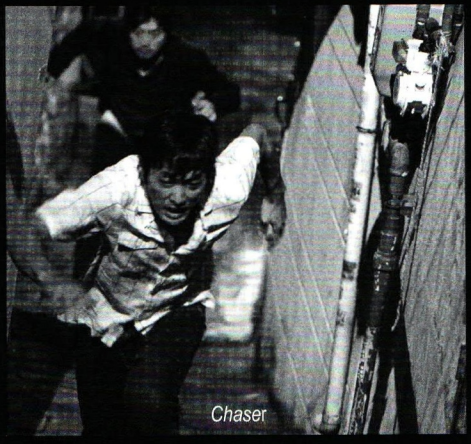
The Chaser

as the two dog each other uphill across the city, flailing and brawling, bellowing and kicking and beating the snot out of one another.

After our deadly john is brought in for questioning, the cops wind up sympathizing with him because our ex-cop has a rep for losing control. If only they knew one of the missing girls was still alive after having had a hammer and chisel taken to her head. Oh yeah, gorehounds, there's blood for you, but the scenes of violence are handled with a lot of authenticity. People don't just get beaten or get dead that easily. These things take time. Remember that corridor fight in **Oldboy**? Well, at least Na Hong-jin took that scene to heart. **The Chaser** is a high tension thriller that derives much of its nuance from **Kim Yun-seok**'s stellar performance as the driven, often bewildered pimp who just can't catch a break. He's by turns subdued, sorrowful, furious, and baffled, a perfect balance to Ha Jung-woo as the impotent serial killer who meets his enemies and victims with the same kind of chilling, stony repose.

Damn straight, these are some of the most sleek, beguiling, and unique examinations of story and character in the crime and horror genres. My fedora's off to them. But tell me, seriously, can you get a good plate of lasagna in Koreatown? ☑

New York Times described *Tom Piccirilli* as having "the authentic surrealist's gift of blind trust in his imagination." Besides being the award-winning author fifteen novels, he is a strikingly astute film critic. Mr Piccirilli joined Asian Cult Cinema with issue 60.



Chaser

The Good The Bad The Weird

There is no movie I've seen more times than ***Sergio Leone***'s **Good, The Bad and the Ugly**. And frankly, there's no movie I love more. While I freely admit it's not a perfect film [I'm still bothered by Tuco's escape from the rafters in the Southern saloon], it has an astonishingly good beginning – maybe no other movie has introduced characters so effortlessly – and the most perfect ending I've ever seen. Once the *"Ecstacy for Gold"* sequence begins, that movie transcends into a sacred place reserved for few others. The more I've seen that film, the more I realize the middle section [the chase 'n' being chased part] is overly long, even to the point of tedium. But that rambling section also conditions the audience for the singular intensity of the graveyard denouement.

Why did I just spend a hundred words talking about an old, non-Asian Spaghetti Western?

Because after watching this new Korean movie, **The Good, The Bad, The Weird** from director Kim Jee-woon, I realize the same criticism applies. The opening half hour – when the three main characters meet during a grueling, ultra-violent train robbery – is shockingly good. The middle hour, while fun, is little more than treadmill theatrics. But the final half hour! This is remarkable cinema, obviously inspired by Leone and his vision of the American West, but decidedly fresh. Director Kim (after helming **Bittersweet Life** and **Quiet Family**) has taken a well-worn story and turned it into something new, something frightfully original.

The only bad thing about this movie is the title. But don't let that keep you from the experience of a lifetime.

– Thomas Weisser, editor

CAPSULE

BY THOMAS WEISSER AND ARCHIE COLE

SCHOOL GIRL HELL (2008) (Japan) [Import]
director: Hiroyuki Kawasaki
starring: Masahiko Miyabi · Mayuko Sasaki

Oniroku Dan, the author of *Flower and Snake* and *Wife to Be Sacrificed* (plus hundreds of other sado fare), is the writer behind this ugly, meanspirited pink film. A billionaire hires an erotic novelist and an unemployed porn director to make a private S&M movie. For the lead role, they recruit a poor university student who is desperate for money. But when the girl finds out what she's expected to do for the bucks, she refuses to get involved. The producers won't take "no" for an answer. They tie her up and toss her in the dungeon beneath the billionaire's house. Struggling for survival this student must forget about her dignity [the author's favorite plot point] and accept the fact that she's now the star of the movie whether she likes it or not.

If you are repulsed by Japanese SM Pink, don't even consider watching. The movie is what it is. The subject matter either appeals or it doesn't. This is ugly fare without cumbersome social messages. Specifically – to actually review this movie – kudos to Ms Sasaki for her grueling performance. It's difficult to assess how much is *acting* and how much is *real.* Director Kawasaki does the best he can with his minimal budget, but his camerawork is pedestrian and the pacing uninspired. Production values don't match similar *Nikkatsu* fare from decades ago. ★★☆

ART OF THE DEVIL 3 (2008) (Thai) [Import]
director: Pasith Buranachan
starring: Suppakom Kitsuwan

The third installment of Thailand's gore/vengeance series offers another variation on the "sexually abused female taking bloody revenge" theme. This time, when a group of young people get together during a funeral, they realize black magic seems to be controlling their lives and they decide to figure out how and why. But in reality, one of the girls in the group is seeking vengeance for something that happened during their high school days. No big surprises in the plot [truth be told, it's essentially the same story as *Art of the Devil 2*] but the real reason to watch these movies is for the bizarre, gruesome murder set pieces. And this one delivers on that level. In spades. ★★☆

SEX AND CHOPSTICKS (2008) (HK) [Import]
director: Man Jei Chin
starring: Lam Wai-Kim · Hiraru Wakana

Here is a successful return to the golden-age of HK category III sex films from veteran director Man Jei Chin (*Naked Poison* and *Sex and Zen 2*). Based on the classic Chinese erotic book *Plum in the Golden Vase*, here is the story of wealthy scholar Simon Qing, a virgin despite schooling in the-ways-of-love by his womanizing father. Eventually Simon meets wanton Violette and is formally introduced to manhood. However, their lust doesn't last, and they part ways. Simon is dejected. He takes to the road where he soon meets an inexperienced nun (yes, bald under her habit). After months of blissful lovemaking, he decides to form a harem. ★★★

BUTTERFLY LOVERS (2008) (HK) [Import]
director: Jingle Ma
starring: Charlene Choi · Chu Wu

A remake of *Tsui Hark*'s film from the early nineties, retold by *Seoul Raider director Jingle Ma* (with assistance from *Ching Siu-Tung* for the action sequences). In the East Jun Dynasty, the wealthy Zhu's family has made enemies with the higher authorities. The family's only daughter Zhi is the target for a kidnapping. Her father, fearing for the girl's safety, dresses the her as a boy and

REVIEWS

enrolls Zhi in an all male Kung fu school. She soon meets Shau and gender complications arise. The two students become involved romantically. But then, everything becomes further complicated when Zhi is exposed and arrested.

As one might expect, the success or failure of this movie hangs on one unequivocal detail: how effective is Zhi's disguise as a boy? The answer – unfortunately – is Charlene Choi. There NOTHING masculine about her. ★★

TWIN BLADES OF THE NINJA (2008) (Japan)
director: Yoshikazu Kato [Switchblade Video]
starring: Risa Koda · Neon Kanda

Two young female ninjas choose the wrong samurai to rob of his wallet. This poor judgment results in difficult times during their next hired job as bodyguard for a princess. But despite the overwhelming odds that face them, Yamama and Suzume have at least one trick no one is expecting... they're willing to bare all their weapons in order to survive! Like many other adult ninja movies produced recently by Japan's *Museum Studios*, this one is little more than an excuse to showcase sexy contemporary starlets in traditional garb. Sure, they look good in their mini-ninja outfits, but they also look sorely out-of-place. The plot – likewise – panders brazenly to the BD enthusiasts by placing these lovely fighters in captivity (tied up in RED ropes) for the majority of the film. ★★

FOREVER THE MOMENT (2008) (Korea) [Import]
director: Yim Soonrye
starring: Moon So-Ri · Kim Jeong-Eum

Moon So-Ri, the award-winning star of *Oasis* and *Bewitching Attraction,* shines in a "Female Sports" film based on the story of the actual team that went to the Athens Olympics in 2004. The story focuses specifically on the lives of four women who – by virtue of their athletic prowess and past experience with the "politics of Olympics" – are recruited into a team to play a very obscure (and brutal) game of handball. The on-screen action is remarkable; this appears to be director Yim's forte. The human-interest stuff is there but the game is fully centerstage. This is especially odd (and remarkable) since the plot is inspired by the acclaimed penalty shot that decided the game at the 2004 Olympics. In other words, the audience for this movie already knows the ending. Despite this uneasy fact, Yim deliberately focuses the lion's share of his narrative on this event. That decision is playing with fire. It could have just as easily destroyed the film's momentum but the result here is wildly effective. Even with the knowledge of how this thing will end, the ending comes complete with a swell of anticipation, joy and even tears. ★★★☆

SEXY BATTLE GIRLS (2008) (Japan) [Pink Ega]
director: Mototsugi Watanabe
starring: Kyoko Hashimoto · Ayumi Taguchi

High School girl Mirai is transferred to an upscale private girls' academy. She soon finds out the school not only cultivates young minds, but also supplies young bodies to rich politicians. After learning that the school's principal was responsible for destroying her family, she undergoes special ninja training to get revenge.

There are two different edits of this movie. The fully uncut version includes graphic scenes of oral sex; however it should be noted that the fellated dicks are actually rubber juice-filled dildos. Not sure what effect director Watanabe was hoping for – or why – but the result is more unnerving than the real thing would've been. ★★☆

Thomas Weisser is the editor & founder of Asian Cult Cinema magazine; *Archie Cole,* a University of Miami film school graduate, is manager of ACC e-commerce website.

a column by Max Allan Collins

FOREIGN CRIMES

My approach to this column, for some years now, has been to review films that I like – negative reviews are the easiest thing to write, and the air these days is full of smug nobodies pontificating on the shortcomings of somebodies. Whether I fall into the *"nobody"* or *"somebody"* column is up to you, but I have to say I feel uncomfortable writing negative reviews, and writing one about a film from an artist I admire is a painful task.

Also, this column is ostensibly about crime films, although editor **Tom Weisser** has kindly allowed me to stray in various directions from that path. The film at discussion this time is an historical epic, set in the final days of the Han Dynasty, and deals with history and myth on a grand scale. But its director (and co-writer) is suspense specialist **John Woo**, whose virtues I have extolled in this column (and in my previous ***Mystery Scene Magazine*** column), starting years before Woo had become anything like the major figure he is today.

The previous issue of this magazine was a love letter to Woo and his new film, **Red Cliff**, marking the director's triumphant return to Chinese filmmaking (in box-office terms at least) after an extended, sometimes disappointing but at times rewarding period in Hollywood. **Stefan S** called **Red Cliff** "a contender for movie of the year," and my friend **Ric Meyers** was similarly laudatory, comparing Woo's task (and accomplishment) to **David Lean** making a movie about Valley Forge. In her interview with the director, **Lisa Stokes** spoke of the film's importance, scope and epic nature. And in that interview, John Woo claimed that his film is "character-driven," and that **Red Cliff** is a "great story."

Many readers of ACC will agree with those views, or at least certainly find much to admire in the film. I find much to admire myself, but I have to admit that **Red Cliff** was a hard go for me, and finally a major disappointment. I viewed the film on *Mei Ah* Blu-Ray disc, which I would guess is the preferred way to see it, other than in a theater – the colors are vivid, the action predictably crisp, the sound thunderous. The disc (like the film) has its flaws, however – random frames are skipped in a manner that I doubt is Woo's doing, and periodically an annoy-

Max Allan Collins is a celebrated mystery novelist and filmmaker living in his native Iowa. His most recent novels are ***The First Quarry*** (from *Hard Case Crime*) and (collaborating with the late *Mickey Spillane*) ***The Goliath Bone***, a Mike Hammer novel. His newest film is the documentary ***Caveman: V T Hamlin & Alley Oop***, available on DVD from VCI. He co-wrote the screenplay of the current film ***Last Lullaby*** (starring Tom Sizemore) from his acclaimed crime novel, ***The Last Quarry***.

Red Cliff

RED CLIFF PHOTOS COURTESTY OF BEIJING FILMS, CHINA FILMS AND LION ROCK PRODUCTIONS

ing "HD" logo appears (thankfully in the black above the image area, but nonetheless distracting).

With the exception of occasional swooping camera moves, bits and pieces of battle scenes, and some slow-motion doves, I would never have guessed this to be a John Woo film. It is a stodgy epic with cardboard characters and occasional weak humor, particularly politically correct nonsense having to do with male/female stereotypes. Ric Meyers speaks of his "array of Chinese sculptures seem(ing) to come to life on the screen," and points out that Woo gives "three-dimensional life to some of Chinese mythology's most popular characters."

But Woo really doesn't do any more than animate Ric's sculptures, and with considerably less panache than ***Ray Harryhausen*** might have – the mythic heroes are instead depicted in broad, even juvenile strokes. Most ridiculous are the moments where various of these characters – famous to Chinese viewers and perhaps to Ric (and fans as knowledgeable as some of you reading this) – step forward to stop raging battles cold, while both sides watch as a warrior single-handedly takes on an absurd number of opponents. The illogic of this, the cartoonish quality, interrupts and disrupts often otherwise Woo-worthy poetic action scenes, the kind where grace and grittiness combine in his signature fashion.

Red Cliff may well work magic on audiences in China, and play effectively for the knowledgeable among you who know these characters from reading literature, watching films, or even playing video games. For a more mainstream western audience, **Red Cliff** fails to meet the universality test – a film like *Zhang Yimou*'s ***Jet Li*** epic **Hero** delves into the exotic history and mythology of China while presenting vivid, memorable characters in compelling stories-within-the-story. But Woo parades players that are at once recognizably stock figures and yet (to Western audiences) unrecognizable as familiar characters. Imagine Davy Crockett in his coonskin cap at the Alamo, swinging Old Betsy – only you have no knowledge of his backstory; or the Thing lumbers out and yells, "It's clobberin' time," only you've never seen this orange apparition before. The correct response in such a situation is, "Huh?"

Red Cliff

While the film indeed has epic sweep, and several compelling battle scenes, **Red Cliff** falls far short of achieving universal accessibility. Woo may not care, but it's a missed opportunity – if any filmmaker alive could have made this film one that audiences worldwide might have embraced, it is John Woo.

Further, the film is deeply flawed in its over-use of obvious CGI. Seeing computer-generated blood in a John Woo movie is enough to make fans of his classic heroic bloodshed films shake their heads in dismay. The awkward structure is similarly troubling – rather than ending after the first half of the battle, we linger for a *Mystery Science Theater*-worthy moment that has the good guys wondering what to do about the wooden ships of the bad guys...while multiple bowls of fire burn behind them as they contemplate this tough conundrum. Finally we come up to an anticlimax and the cheat of a *"to be continued."* That **Red Cliff** lacks a genuine cliffhanging ending sort of says it all. ☑

A RETROSPECTIVE BY
J L CARROZZA

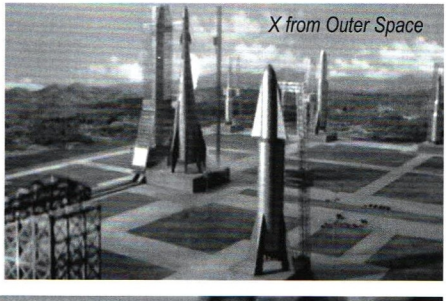
松竹映画

Shochiku's Horror Films of the 1960s

Shochiku was one of Japan's biggest studios in the '60s. After the Japanese monster and special effects film genres took off with the ***Godzilla*** series at *Toho*, every other studio got in on the action and made *"genre"* productions of their own, including *Shochiku*, who made a quartet of scifi/horror/fantasy films. These were an interesting bunch of seldom mentioned movies ranging in theme from ghost ships to genocidal bees to giant reptilian space chickens to vampires from the stars. Obscure up until now, even most Japanese cult film scholars have yet to do a complete essay on all of them.

The first of these films is 1967's **X From Outer Space**, directed by **Kazui Nihonmatsu**. If it's possible to simultaneously adore and despise a movie, those are my sentiments. It's the **Plan 9 from Outer**

J L Carrozza penned a column for *Animerica* Magazine under the alias *Kojiro Abe*. Currently, he is a staff reviewer for the TohoKingdom website and KFCC.com



X from Outer Space

Goke: Bodysnatcher from Hell

Space of *kaiju* films: awful yet so wonderfully kitsch as to be relentlessly entertaining. The film's faults (and simultaneous virtues) are easy to find. First, the film depicts space travel as a joint venture between old pals Japan and Germany, which is odd, to say the least. Also unusual is the film's depiction of space. Forget **2001: A Space Odyssey**, this is not the foreboding and sterile *"real"* space, no it's happy. Upbeat. Complete with a moon-base where everybody sits around and sips martinis.

The film's monster, Guilala, is just about the silliest looking kaiju ever designed. It's basically a reptilian space chicken with horns, bug eyes and antennae. **X**'s human cast is a mix of professional Japanese actors and a few gaijin. **Eiji Okada**, known for starring in ***Resnais***' **Hiroshima Mon Amour** and ***Teshigahara***'s **Woman in the Dunes** is very far from those classics here as he tries to command respectability. Then there are the westerns, most notably **Peggy Neal**, better known as *Sonny Chiba*'s white squeeze in **Terror Beneath the Sea** (1966); she was the lady scientist Lisa. Also on hand are **Franz Gruber** [who also starred in **Terror and Later Prophecies of Nostradamus** (1974)] and **Mike Daning** (whose name has been misspelled numerous times and ways) as the obnoxious and whiny Dr. Stein. This is a bad movie, no doubt, but there's also something wonderful about its ineptitude.

Shochiku's next stop would be **Goke, Body Snatcher from Hell** (1968), directed by **Hajime Sato**, an interesting but less than prolific genre filmmaker. His first notable film was the *Mario Bava*-inspired **Ghost of the Hunchback** (1965). He then made the aforementioned **Terror Beneath the Sea** and later **The Golden Bat** (also 1966). **Goke** would mark, sadly, Sato's last feature film, but what a swan song! **Goke,**

The Living Skeleton

Body Snatcher from Hell is a favorite Japanese horror films of the 1960s, alongside such notable movies as ***Nobuo Nakagawa***'s **Jigoku** (1960) and ***Ishiro Honda***'s **Matango** (1963). There's something amazing about this film. It's got the Cold War paranoia of **Invasion of the Body Snatchers** mixed with the outlandish visuals of Bava's **Planet of the Vampires**. The film has been getting more press in the last few years because, when creating a scene in **Kill Bill**, ***Quentin Tarantino*** turned to this movie for visual inspiration. **Goke** involves a plane that crashes into a deserted wasteland and the arrival of a race of aliens. The aliens take possession of an an assassin (**Hideo Ko**) and turn him into a vampire who stalks and preys on the other crash survivors.

From the film's strong visuals to the consistently gloomy atmosphere, **Goke, Body Snatcher from Hell** is also loaded with some wondrously screwy sequences, particularly the alien possession scenes in which the Gokemidoro aliens ooze their way into Ko's skull via a vertical vagina-like gash. Another thing worth mentioning about **Goke** is how deeply political and psychological a horror film it really is. The movie contains a number of jabs at Vietnam and WWII. The film's misanthropic Sartre-like vision of a group of castaways behaving badly is quite reminiscent of **Matango** at times. And the ending is one of the grimmest, most nihilistic ever seen in a Japanese film!

The acting in **Goke** is mostly good and a lot of the actors are much better known to

yakuza and ero-guro film aficionados. **Teruo Yoshida** and Hideo Ko both later starred in ***Teruo Ishii***'s **Yakuza Lynching** and **Horrors of Malformed Men** and **Nobuo Kaneko** would play the pivotal Boss Yamamori role in ***Kinji Fukasaku***'s seminal **Battles Without Honor and Humanity** series. The film's weakest link is **Cathy Horan** who delivers a wooden and amateurish performances. Another blight is the occasional silly FX (*e.g.,* dummies thrown off cliffs), but regardless – particularly for Japanese cult film lovers – **Goke** delivers.

In the same vein, made later in 1968, is **The Living Skeleton**. Here is one of the most underrated and under-appreciated Japanese cult films ever made. It's quite a cool, atmospheric and beautifully creepy Japanese genre film, sorta like **Carnival of Souls** directed by ***Riccardo Freda***. If **Goke** is a triumph of color then **The Living Skeleton** surely is an triumph in the use of monochrome. The film's sumptuous visuals, of fog shrouded ships, the so distinctly Japanese image of ghostly young women with flowing long black hair, emaciated can-

nibalistic doctors and of skeletons bobbing up beneath the sea are so gorgeously eerie.

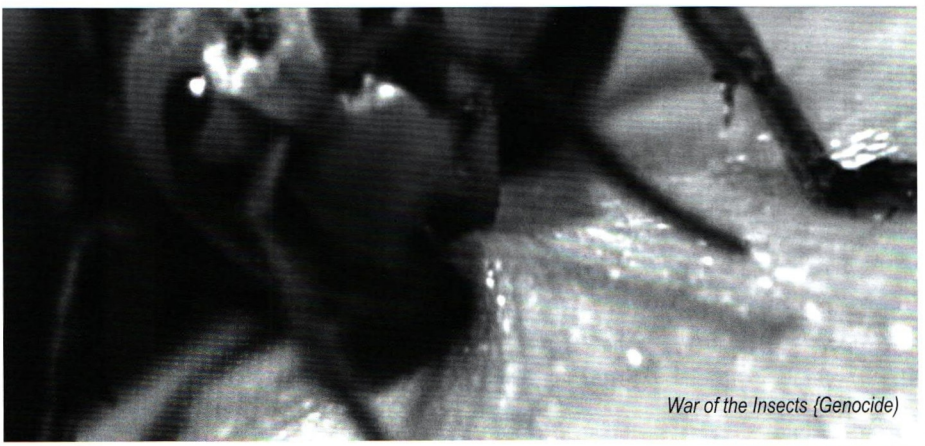
It's interesting to note that the director of **The Living Skeleton**, ***Hiroshi Matsuno***, never made another film – before or after. This is as unfortunate as Hajime Sato's retirement after **Goke**. Matsuno is like the ***Michael Reeves*** (**Witchfinder General**) of Japanese horror films, both only made one notable film but both debuts were so great one can only imagine how far their careers would've stretched. **The Living Skeleton** is a triumph; it deserves much more press than it gets, particularly in the West.

Shochiku's next sci-fi/horror film was **War of the Insects** (*aka* **Genocide**, also 1968), with **Kazui Nihonmatsu** back in the director's chair. **War of the Insects** has a ship carrying a nuclear bomb going down in Japan after being attacked by a swarm of bees. One of the ship's crew members, Charlie (**Chico Roland**, the black guy who lost his testicles to Sonny Chiba in **The Street Fighter**) goes crazy and starts whimpering about insects. Meanwhile, Joji (**Yusuke Kawazu**), is framed in the *"murders"* of the other pilots by the US government. At the end, however, everything is traced to Anabelle (**Goke**'s ***Cathy Horan***), a bitter and misanthropic Holocaust survivor who watched her family die in a concentration camp and has been breeding the bees to destroy mankind.

War of the Insects is ultimately an interesting film. It mixes together two Cold War-era fears: nuclear annihilation and insects overtaking mankind. In the 60s and 70s, there were "killer bees" allegedly coming up from South America and people were paranoid, hence all the "bee movies" like ***Irwin Allen***'s **The Swarm**. The film also depicts the American government as absolutely despicable, every bit as bad as the communist spies it's hunting.

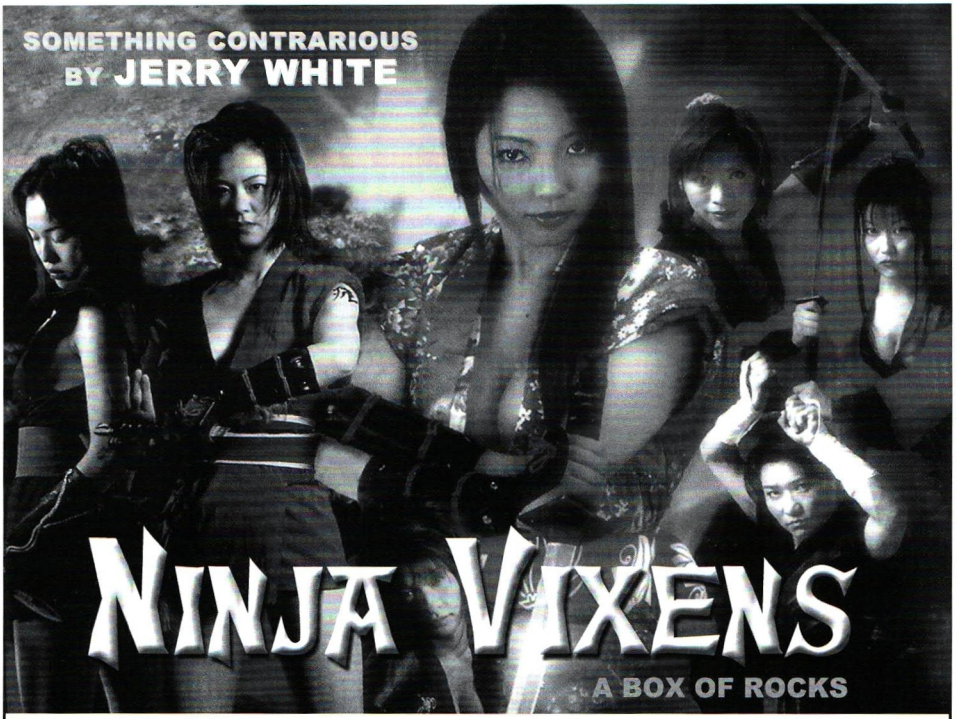
Sadly, after **War of the Insects**, Shochiku ceased production of their genre films. Decades later, director **Minoru Kawasaki** (***Everybody Sinks But Japan***), himself a huge tokusatsu fan, directed a politicized spoof/sequel of **X From Outer Space** called **Monster X Strikes Back: Attack the G8 Summit** (2008).

Also notable is that *Janus Films* (the famed film archive whose properties are released by ***Criterion***), reportedly has rights to all four films. Cult movie fans should brace for a Shochiku horror boxed set from *Criterion* in the spirit of their Monsters and Madmen package. ☑



War of the Insects (Genocide)

SOMETHING CONTRARIOUS
BY JERRY WHITE



NINJA VIXENS

A BOX OF ROCKS

The ***Ninja Vixens*** series holds a lot of promise, as it features two of my favorite things: swordplay and hot Japanese girls. However, there came a point – I think it was about four minutes into the first episode – when I began to worry a bit. Negative thoughts ninjitsued through my mind: Why does this look like a home movie from the 80s? Why are the comedic elements of Japanese films so painfully unfunny to me? Why does the soundtrack I'm hearing have no correlation to the events on screen?

Then, tragedy of all tragedies, there was a naked Japanese actress bathing herself in slow motion and I didn't even care, so embittered was I by the cinematic failings before me. When you can't enjoy good old-fashioned gratuitous nudity, all is not right with the world.

Here, then, are my capsule reviews of the Ninja Vixens series. I've kept my reviews absurdly short, in honor of the films' running times.

Jerry White, a regular contributor to ACC, holds a Master's Degree in English and Creative Writing from Emerson College. He currently teaches in New Jersey.

FLAME OF SEDUCTION

A ninja/farmer – a rare combination, though not as uncommon as kung-fu master/forklift operator – enlists the help of a mute samurai to help defeat her sister Dark Mist, who was quite lovable in her toddler years but has since become pure evil due to the seductions of the treacherous Lion King. The samurai's name is Bell, which very easily could have been changed to Belle to complete the random Disney theme; pondering this for 70 minutes was easier than trying to make sense of the plot. Anyway, the women get naked, some people get killed, and at the end all the characters are resurrected and dance around the screen to what can only be described as a Japanese can-can. And yes – that really is what happens.

CRIMSON BLADES

The movie that dares to describe ninjas as those who "flutter in the darkness," despite the fact that ninjas, to the best of my knowledge, are pretty into the silence, and would in fact frown upon fluttering, clacking, clinking, or even a gentle cawing. The lead *"vixen"* in this entry is Shinobu, the *"best ninja in the village"* who keeps sleeping with various men despite the fact that they always attempt to kill her afterwards. Features the immortal line: *"Run away with me! Let's quit being ninjas!"*

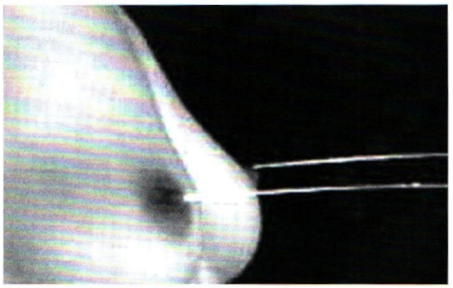
DEVILISH ANGELS

When we first meet Anju, she's on the verge of being raped by three vagabonds who, due to the difficulty of maintaining an erection in cold weather, decide to take her *"to go."* Turns out, however, that Anju is a ninja vixen only pretending to be helpless so she can be taken back to their place and steal their gold (seems like a pretty elaborate plan for petty larceny, but who am I to question a ninja?). A beggar girl witnesses this and begs Anju to train her, which leads to a master/pupil sequence that would be a four-minute montage in any other movie, but pretty much pads out the whole running time here.

VIXEN DROPOUTS

On paper, the premise to this one is pretty hilarious. A secret base trains ninja vixens, who are separated into classes according to their ability. The movie features the training of the *'N'* class, which is composed of a wacky band of misfits who *"can't keep up"* with the other students, and eventually defeat the villain by attacking him with cartoon flowers. A more accurate title for this movie would have been ***"Special Ed Ninjas,"*** especially since a certain degree of mental retardation is required to enjoy a minute of this crap.

All photos in this article from corresponding *Ninja Vixen* film courtesy Neon-G Video



WEB OF PASSION

I'm no expert on the technical aspects of filmmaking. But I'm sure a professional director could have a field day with the cuts in this movie, which are haphazard, disorienting, and... off somehow. The movie, especially during its fight sequences, changes from color to black-and-white to sepia, like the director just got a new camcorder for Christmas and is having fun playing with all the buttons. On the plus side, this movie features a floating head that is really just a dude with his torso photoshopped out (hilarious!), a legitimately hot ninja (finally!), and a secret pill *"concocted from a dead woman's internal organs."* and acid squirting tits. It's all to find the Sacred Scroll of Ninja, proving yet again that while ninjas are masters of fighting and deception, their scroll-keeping abilities are sorely lacking.

FORBIDDEN PARADISE

Say what you want about the shoddy production values, horrible acting, and horrendous plotline, but this episode features two hot Japanese girls bathing each other in the nude as well as this immortal bit of dialogue: *"If we exist only for procreate, we are nothing but tools. That is too sad."* There's also a pink-haired ninja with a gun, much more sex than the other movies, and a twist ending. All in all, the ***Gone with the Wind*** of *Ninja Vixens* movies.

TREASURE OF LUST

This is not technically a *Ninja Vixens* movie at all, but a *Bounty Hunter Vixens* flick, which means the women wear more clothes and get paid when they kill people. The villainess, Lotus, is a sexy sorceress who forces the men of the village to sleep with her. Those poor bastards. The vixens gather their forces to stop her, despite the men's insistence that everything is *"totally cool."* In the end they fight some monsters that look like rejects from the latest episode of *Power Rangers*.

CARNAL ENCHANTMENT

Attempting to avenge her father's death, Iris is nearly killed by her enemy but is nursed back to health by a sorceress and her brother. Due to its supernatural storyline – which includes lots of spells and a climax in which the heroes protect the village from a bunch of sprits – this episode features a lot more special

effects than any of the other entries, which is not a good thing when your technical capabilities are limited to obvious green screens and make-up that looks as though it were purchased at Party City.

DEMONIC SACRIFICES

All the episodes of Ninja Vixen have been building up to this moment: 89 minutes of exactly what you've seen before. Actually, the plot is pretty interesting, for what it is: Firefly, a gorgeous ninja (big surprise) uses a magic sword to resurrect her lord from the dead, with the unfortunate side effect of his now being a demon. Firefly has to gather all her hot friends together to defeat him, while still finding time to have gratuitous sex, which can be very draining. The swordplay is handled a bit better in this movie, in that it doesn't look totally stupid, and you actually feel bad for the resurrected lord, who was a good sort in life and just kind of got forced into this whole evil entity deal.

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For those interested, the ***Ninja Vixen*** boxset also contains a horror movie, **Virgin Nightmares**. I didn't watch it, but it does have the tagline *"Terror spreads from between the cracks,"* which sounds vaguely suggestive.

That's something, I suppose. ☑

Actor / writer / director **Lee Kang-Sheng** must have mixed feelings about the Rotterdam Film Festival. His first movie **The Missing** won a Tiger Award in 2004, but when he went to the *Cinemart* part of the festival (to try and get funding) for his next movie, he didn't get any!

And now that he has finally finished his next film [with a Taiwanese government grant], **Help Me, Eros** has been hailed as "a striking film by a striking moviemaker." Oh well, *art is art and business is business* and apparently it's never sure the twain shall meet, not even at Rotterdam Cinemart.

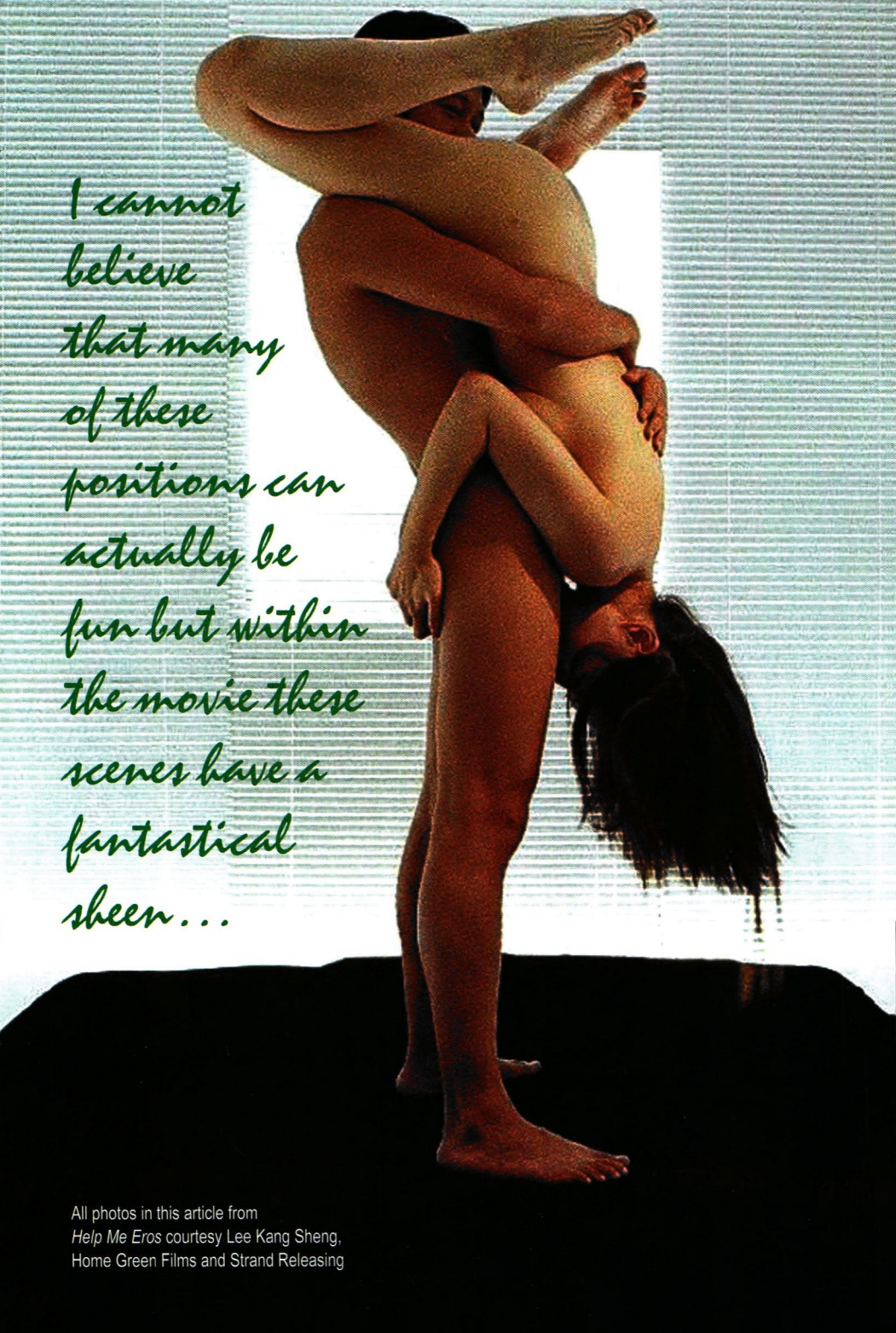
Although I could see this movie as not being the easiest of sales, **Help Me, Eros** is a somber movie telling the last part of a stock-trader's downfall. It focuses on the man's desperate clinging to the few luxuries he has left while he drags himself through every day on a diet of sex, drugs and fantasies about a girl at the other end of a suicide-helpline.

It's also partially autobiographical.

Ard Vijn is the editor and contributor for *Twitchfilm.net*, a website specializing in non-mainstream movies. He lives with his wife and two sons in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, where the local film festivals often provide his best scoops.

THE STORY

Ah Jie (played by director Lee) is – correction, WAS – a successful stock-broker who has recently lost everything in a bad exchange. His assets have been frozen, his car and apartment impounded. Not that he stops using them, he just breaks the seals day after day. What little he has left he sells to the pawnshop and the money is mainly spent on taking care of his greenhouse, where he produces his own high-grade marijuana. In desperation he calls a suicide helpline and grows attached to the kind voice on the line. He starts to stalk the girl with whom he (mistakenly) thinks he's spoken, and also gets into a relation of sorts with a whoring salesgirl. But it all amounts to nothing. Ah Jie seems to be on a dead-end-street and even the best sex in the world is not going to change that...


I cannot believe that many of these positions can actually be fun but within the movie these scenes have a fantastical sheen...

All photos in this article from *Help Me Eros* courtesy Lee Kang Sheng, Home Green Films and Strand Releasing

THE MOVIE

In one of the first shots of **Help Me: Eros**, we see Ah Jie watching a cooking-show on television. Onscreen a fish is quickly gutted, sliced, partly fried and served on a plate while it's alive, the head still gasping for air. The cooks stand around joking about it, wondering what the fish is thinking. *"Help me!"*, one cook suggests. And that is basically a metaphor for Ah Jie's story; he's the fish. He has been burnt financially, his insides torn out, the rug pulled out from under his rich yuppie lifestyle and all he can do is gasp a few last useless breaths before expiring. The allegory is not subtle but very accurate and there is a lot of that sort of thing in **Help Me Eros**.

Like his mentor **Tsai Ming-Liang** (acting as executive producer and art designer here), Lee Kang-Sheng uses many long static shots to show his story. While Lee's compositions are perhaps not as masterful as Tsai's, Lee seems more daring. But the result is very pleasing to the eye. The movie looks insanely good.

Stellar acting seems to be a given in movies by these two. Lee Kang-Sheng put himself in the lead as a cost-cutting

measure but given his intimacy with the story, it was a good decision. **Yin Shin** plays Shin the betelnut girl, and she is VERY good in a difficult role, obviously not just there for the eye-candy. And **Jane Liao** is brilliant as the girl on the suicide helpline who tells other people all day to take control of their lives, while she herself suffers from a major eating disorder.

However, there are some things which harm the movie. First and foremost is the difficulty to identify with Ah Jie once he becomes an asshole, halfway through the movie. You can (sorta) follow his reasoning up to a point, but once he becomes abusive, Lee Kang-Sheng loses the audience. The same goes for several other characters: while Lee is

Help Me Eros

especially good at showing why people *suffer* he cannot quite explain the why people do the abusing.

Second is the depiction of sex, which will most likely turn droves of people away. The first sex scene is a weed-induced fantasy-sequence. It's wild but tasteful, not featuring full-nudity but DAMN it doesn't need to.

However once Ah Jie gets involved with the prostitutes, the scenes are graphic and intense [straight from the advanced sections of the *Kama Sutra*]. I cannot believe that many of these positions can actually be fun but within the movie these scenes have a fantastical sheen, especially when the participants have famous brand logos projected on them. This is definitely *"sex: the fantasy"* and not *"sex: the reality!"* As a result, **Help Me Eros** is catching hell, getting censored for its "exploitative" content.

It does make a point though as it underscores the excesses. In Ah Jie's world, everything – from sex to joints – needs to be "topped" as quickly as possible. The movie also shows the distance people will go to shield them from harsh realities.

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Lee Kang-Sheng was planning from the start to put a lot of nudity and explicit (albeit, soft) sex in the movie, but the only actresses he found willing to bare themselves were either models or into adult entertainment. This resulted in the women being nothing short of gorgeous, which helps in making the nudity even more excessive.

In short: if you are easily offended by strong erotic content, this movie probably won't be to your taste. Then again, the title probably warned you already.

CONCLUSION

Like a Tsai Ming-Liang film this is a deliberate character study with a message.

Un-like a Tsai Ming-Liang film this one is flashy. Still, it's a heavy meal rather than a light snack! Highly recommended. ☑

LEE KANG-SHENG

Interview Conducted by
ARD VIJN and
PETER VAN DER LUGT

Lee Kang Sheng in *Wayward Cloud*

Shortly after **Peter van der Lugt** and I saw **Lee Kang-Sheng**'s newest movie **Help Me, Eros** we got an opportunity to speak with the man himself at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. To be honest, this was a weird experience: first we see movie posters for **Help me, Eros** everywhere in the city (featuring a naked Lee Kang-Sheng with hemp leaves painted on him, having graphic sex with an angel), then we see him larger than life on the big screen in a very explicit role, next we're shaking hands with him.

Bizarre.

And **Help Me, Eros** isn't exactly the easiest of films to talk about. It's great for discussing with other movie fans, make no mistake, but asking specifics from its creator is something else. For example, it's easy to say "Dude, did you see that threesome?" to a friend. It's a lot less easy to address the scene to the person who acted, wrote and directed. Thankfully we didn't need to worry about questions becoming too embarrassing, as Mr. Lee was very candid and willing to fill in the blanks.

[A note from the editor considering the format for this interview: both *Ard Vijn* and *Peter van der Lugt* conducted this interview jointly – in some instances simuteanously. In order to make this piece more readable, the questions have been reconstructed as single inquiries]

ACC: Our first question is a bit of a standard one, but we'd like to know why you decided to make ***Help Me, Eros****. It covers quite some intimate subjects… you are the writer, director and actor of this film, so it's not like you were inspired by a book. You totally created this yourself, from scratch. Why specifically was this story so important to you?*

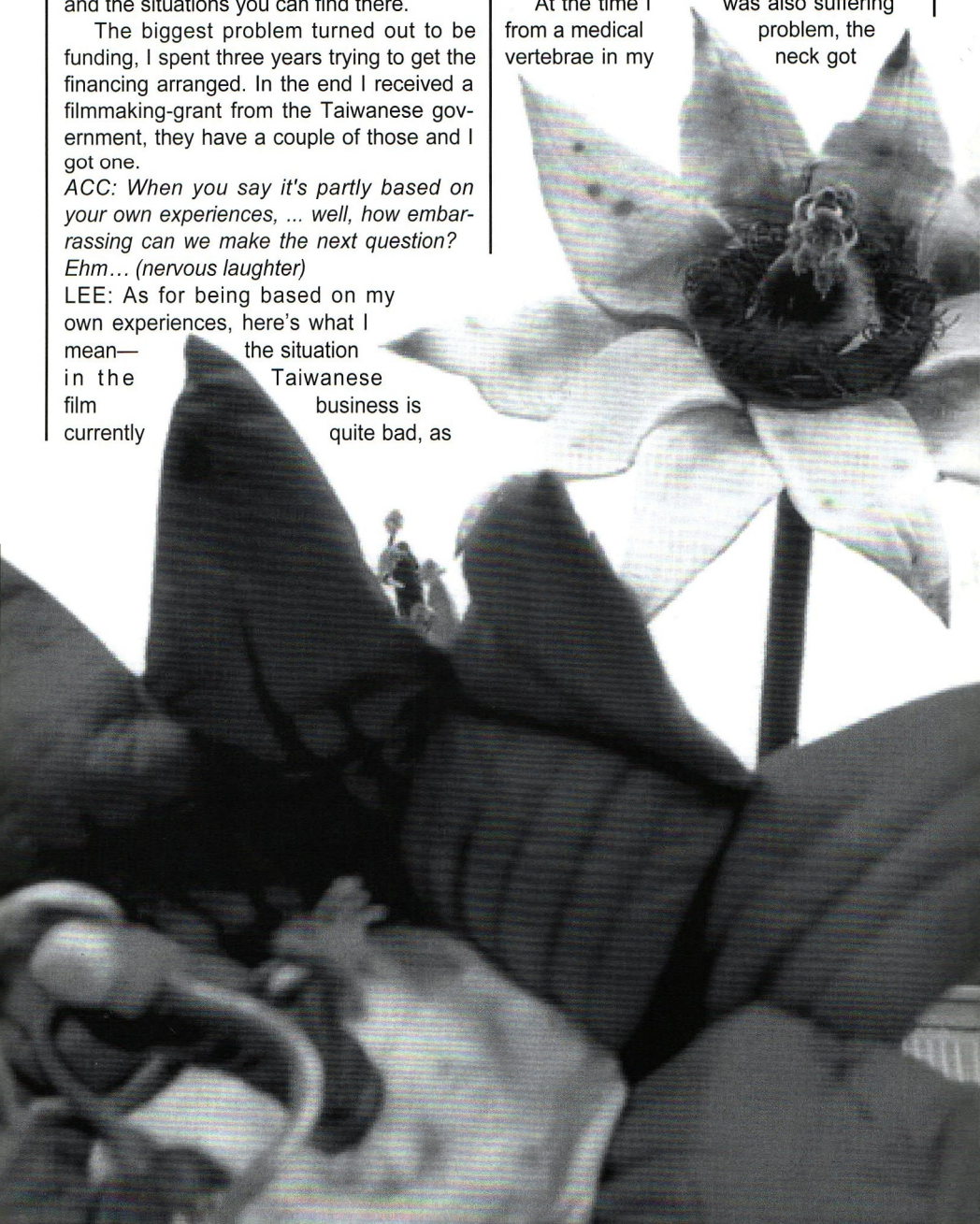
LEE: I've been walking around with the idea for this movie for a long time, even from before I made my first movie **The Missing**, but at that time I had not written a script yet. Directly after shooting **The Missing** I started writing the script for this movie, because it's partly based on my own experiences and observations on Taiwanese society, and the situations you can find there.

The biggest problem turned out to be funding, I spent three years trying to get the financing arranged. In the end I received a filmmaking-grant from the Taiwanese government, they have a couple of those and I got one.

ACC: When you say it's partly based on your own experiences, ... well, how embarrassing can we make the next question? Ehm... (nervous laughter)

LEE: As for being based on my own experiences, here's what I mean— the situation in the Taiwanese film business is currently quite bad, as an actor you hardly get any opportunity to be in a movie or act on stage. What I did was – because I had so much free time on my hands, no acting jobs – I started trading in the stock market. That was not really a good plan though because I lost a lot of money and it left me with some very bad memories. This is shown in the film.

At the time I was also suffering from a medical problem, the vertebrae in my neck got



"twisted" and it took me a year to recover. I consulted many doctors – over 30 doctors – but no-one could find the problem... one of **Tsai Ming-Liang**'s films, **The River**, is actually about that subject.

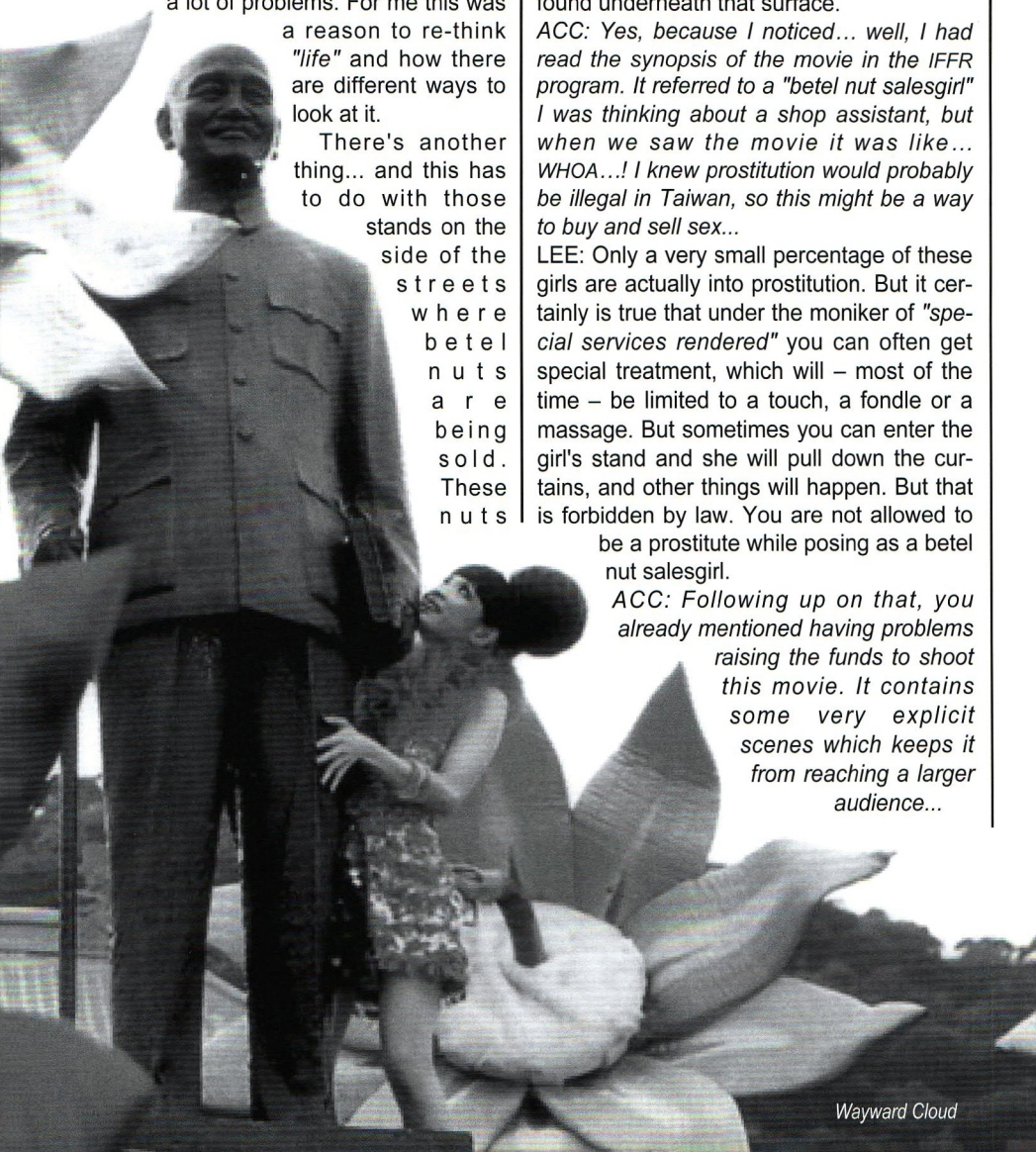
During that time I got more and more depressed, I saw no way out and even contemplated suicide. I called one of those suicide helpline phone-numbers, but it was always busy and I could never get through. So this got me thinking: if that helpline is always occupied it can only mean there are many, many people who, just like me, have a lot of problems. For me this was a reason to re-think *"life"* and how there are different ways to look at it.

There's another thing... and this has to do with those stands on the side of the streets where betel nuts are being sold. These nuts have a mild stimulating effect and are primarily sold to car drivers. In 2000, Tsai Ming-Liang and I made a long journey through Taiwan to promote one of our movies, and we traveled with a van from city to city, from one university to the next. Because we spent so much time on the road we kept running into those betel nut stands everywhere, and I noticed how that was a sort of sub-culture of its own. You have all those girls who look really beautiful, but that's of course all surface and I was wondering what... if anything could be found underneath that surface.

ACC: Yes, because I noticed... well, I had read the synopsis of the movie in the IFFR program. It referred to a "betel nut salesgirl" I was thinking about a shop assistant, but when we saw the movie it was like... WHOA...! I knew prostitution would probably be illegal in Taiwan, so this might be a way to buy and sell sex...

LEE: Only a very small percentage of these girls are actually into prostitution. But it certainly is true that under the moniker of *"special services rendered"* you can often get special treatment, which will – most of the time – be limited to a touch, a fondle or a massage. But sometimes you can enter the girl's stand and she will pull down the curtains, and other things will happen. But that is forbidden by law. You are not allowed to be a prostitute while posing as a betel nut salesgirl.

ACC: Following up on that, you already mentioned having problems raising the funds to shoot this movie. It contains some very explicit scenes which keeps it from reaching a larger audience...



Wayward Cloud

Help Me Eros

This interview was conducted jointly by *Ard Vijn* (see pg 24 for bio information) and *Peter van der Lugt.* Mr van der Lugt is the editor of GhibliWorld.com, a website promoting the works of *Studio Ghibli* by publishing news and exclusive interviews from Japan. He is also a contributor to Twitchfilm.net.

Help Me Eros

LEE: Actually, the grant I received from the Taiwanese government didn't have any demands attached to it, so I did have to cater to a *"target audience."* I think that's excellent, because it means the government people are broad-minded, they just look at your artistic abilities. They really are only interested in artistic potential, so if they think you can deliver a good movie they'll give you the grant.

I'll add to this that **Help Me, Eros**, in its project state, participated in the Rotterdam Festival Cinemart and in the Korean Pusan Festival, and both times we couldn't find any investors for it. Apparently it was considered too risky a project.

So in the end we only had the Taiwanese government money and our own production company funds. One of the reasons why I'm the actor, writer AND director on this was simply that we didn't have enough money to do it otherwise. And the art direction was done by **Tsai Ming-Liang** who was also the producer. A decision we made partly for the same reason, which is that we didn't have much money available.

ACC: Returning to your earlier experiences, do you think you exorcised some inner demons by making this movie?

LEE: Yes, I think so. I think what you see in the movie are people looking for an exit of sorts, an escape, and I think I found mine through creating this film.

Help Me Eros

*ACC: We noticed that the movie you did with Tsai Ming-Liang, **I Don't Want to Sleep Alone**, also showed people with no way out... their mutual intimacy was the only escape they had.*

LEE: Yes.

*ACC: In **Help Me, Eros** however you show that intimacy – or rather sex – is no solution for the main character even though it is the most fantastic sex imaginable. Was this done deliberately, to show a difference between your work and that earlier movie?*

LEE: Of course I depicted sex in this way. On purpose. If you look at young people today, they can't handle stress. They live at an incredibly high pace, and it's sort of... it's like fast food. But not just food, they want to earn as much money as possible quickly. Love and everything must be quick. And when they have gotten hold of something, then they want to have it in large amounts.

And also, when they finally HAVE something they don't know how to cherish it. They cannot keep hold of it. All the time

Lee Kang Sheng's *Missing*

Lee Kang Sheng's *Missing*

Lee Kang Sheng in *Alone*

they're looking at new ways to stun themselves, whether it is sex, or hash, or other drugs, or designer labels... These are all things which you use to stun yourself. That is what I wanted to show.

ACC: We understand how that part is autobiographical. But there are other scenes... like in the beginning with the fish, or the sexual threesome (with everyone covered in Gucci and Louis Vuitton logos)... Is there an autobiographical element in those scenes as well?

LEE: *(chuckling)* Well... part of it is. Like what I just said about young people: I see myself as young enough to be counted as one, so part of me reacts in the same way. For instance I'm ten years younger than Tsai Ming-Liang so there surely is a notable difference between us. It's just my impression of what society is like.

ACC: We hate to constantly keep returning to the subject of erotic content, but there is a lot of it and it's very strong. Are you afraid of censorship? For example, are you afraid the Taiwanese DVD-release for will be cut, even though the Taiwanese government gave you that grant?

LEE: I don't expect anyone to change anything in **Help Me, Eros**. All DVDs should be the same version.

*ACC: How did Tsai Ming-Liang react to the explicit nature of **Help Me, Eros**? He always seems to be very careful, like walking on eggshells, in what he chooses to depict. Like in, say, **I Don't Want to Sleep Alone** and **Wayward Cloud**. Yet those movies were STILL caught up in controversy, censorship and boycotts...*

LEE: *(laughing)* Tsai Ming-Liang had no problems with it whatsoever, but he did say my way of depicting sex was rather direct, much more direct than he would have done it himself. And that's also something a lot of critics and movie experts have said about me: my way of showing sex is more direct, open, and they associate that with the way the younger generation deals with sex, which is more free and direct. They consider me to be young and jumpy.

I do see a difference with directors before me, like Tsai Ming-Liang. The younger directors, like for instance **Ang Lee**, deal with sex in movies in a completely different way.

ACC: One thing we did notice was that all sex scenes contained a fantastical element. Of course the first scene did because it is a drug-induced dream, but also the later scenes always featured something, like the projecting of those logos...

LEE: That's what makes them a metaphor. It's a way to give the audience a hint of what you're trying to say.

ACC: You just said you've lost some inner demons now, does that mean we can expect a different, more positive sort of movie from you in the future? A romantic comedy perhaps?

LEE: *(laughing loud)* It would be fun to try and make a comedy, but it would also be very tough. It would be hard work for me to *"enlarge"* the kind of humor I have at the moment, it wouldn't be easy.

Of course I'm also not a very optimistic kind of person. It is financially so very difficult to get a film made, and the market is shrinking, so I need to make sure a movie doesn't cost me more money than it makes back. Otherwise it's just not possible to make a new film, it's... impossible.

ACC: You visited Rotterdam before with your movie **The Missing** and you left with a Tiger award. Even so, you couldn't get any funding raised in Rotterdam for **Help Me, Eros** but right now it's being shown here. What are your feelings concerning the International Film Festival Rotterdam?

LEE: After we showed **Help Me, Eros** in Venice it was already sold for the Dutch market, or at least negotiated so far that it will be bought. If you look at Europe, France is the only country which hasn't bought it yet.

ACC: France? Surprisingly.

LEE: Yes. I think this is a movie which will play well to European audiences. It could get a foothold. Now we'll just have to wait and see whether or not it will be a success, and then we can decide what, or rather if, we're going to make a new movie in the future. But I'm fairly positive about Europe.

ACC: Say you've found a budget, what would you like your next movie to be about?

LEE: I'm not planning one at the moment. My next project will be that I'm acting again in a film directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. ☑

Original Poster for *Help Me Eros*

Help Me Eros

A special thanks to interpreter *Anne Sytske Keijser* for assistance

ONG BAK 2 photos courtesy *Tony Jaa, Iyara Films* and *Sahanongkolfilm* (Thailand)

COMMENTARY BY **STEFAN S**

ONG BAK 2

There's no doubt I've been a fan of movies starring **Tony Jaa** with the likes of **Ong Bak** and **Tom Yum Goong** being showcases for the *Muay Thai* brand of martial arts, and I fondly remember those hard hitting action sequences that left me gaping, as well as the numerous replays just to drum it through to you that it's all ***Jaa*** and it's all as incredible as can be. And who can forget the latter film with that amazing single take where Jaa had to pound his way from the bottom of a building right to the top? **Ong Bak 2** is a film fans like myself have been waiting for, despite it being marred by some really strange controversy, which also included Jaa walking off the set and disappearing from production *(see page 3)*. But everything's been sorted I guess, for the film to be completed and finally released.

While it's rocking the box office in Thailand, I wonder whether it's because of the controversies that had piqued everyone's interest, or it's because the long break of three years had made everyone salivate at Jaa's long awaited return to the big screen. I wonder because while there are numerous moments in the film that I thoroughly enjoyed, I felt that it fell short too on other areas that had left me shifting in my seat, especially during the first hour.

And the biggest culprit of it all, would be the ending. Tony Jaa wrote this story, and credit to him too in trying to weave together some semblance of a worthy story instead of the more obvious and easier whack-fest end to end. But the ending was somewhat of a cop out, and a disappointment, as it leads potentially and very directly to a third movie to resolve the issues the storyline had left hanging. It could have easily stretched it to say, 20 minutes more to get everything settled, but I guess there were grander plans to the tale that needed another movie to tell. One only wishes that it does get made sooner rather than later, and without the production woes that plagued this one.

So **Ong Bak 2** is actually half a movie, and given that it's a totally new story to begin with, I thought it would make better sense in retitling it, rather than to have a misnomer that it's a sequel. After all, the setting is now back in 15th century Thailand with totally new characters, with Jaa playing Tien, a man of royal lineage who's trying to avenge the death of his parents and entire household under the hands of rival warlords, and a masked man who delivered the killing blow to his dad. The first half of the movie had him learn from a band of bandits

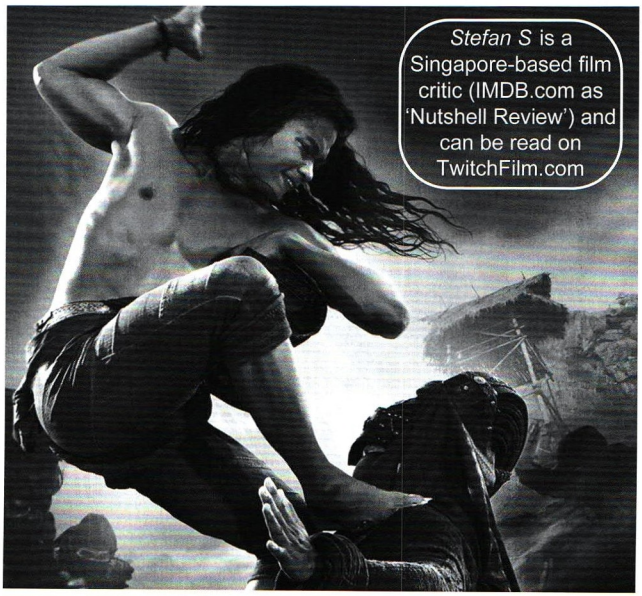
called the Garuda Wing Cliff, where a number of highly skilled exponents teach him all there is to know about their respective fields. I remembered having read somewhere that there's supposed to be some fusion of dance and martial arts, which didn't transpire in this film as far as I can tell (the dance/action sequence here doesn't make the cut), so it might be left for the next movie instead.

Compared to the other *Tony Jaa* movies, you can see that the production values here have been ramped up tremendously. Techniques have also matured, and

gone are the repetitive playbacks. But that doesn't mean you're going to lose out, because like any self-respecting martial arts film, the camera stays still when it should be and at a sane distance away to capture all the action comfortably, and the editing does not cut in and mess up the sequence.

While the filmmaker in Tony Jaa would have matured with this outing (he co-directed this), his maturity as a martial artist on film is now without a doubt. We only get flashes of his Muay Thai when it calls for some close combat involving elbows and knees right smack in the kisser, otherwise we see Jaa as a more complete martial arts practitioner with the employment of a vast array of weapons, from swords to three-section-staffs, and a host of recognizable kung-fu moves, one which also pays homage to the ***Drunken Fists***, and I applaud Jaa's rendition of it too. As for the revered elephant, you know it's never far behind, and there's one thrilling battle atop the large mammal, with *Dan(ce) Chupong* no less, albeit hidden behind a mask.

Ong Bak 2 picked up very slowly, and spent significant time developing the back story of Jaa's Tien. And unfortunately, I do admit unabashedly that I was waiting for action sequence one after another, and those in the same boat will have to be patient. For action junkies, your appetite will only be satiated in the last act of the film, where it's vintage Jaa as he dishes out punishment, and receives much of the same in return. I detested the ending which wrapped everything up so conveniently (I don't buy the Karma bit), or left subplots such as the romantic angle as something to be dwelled upon later (though I believe romance never really was an issue at all in Jaa's movies), leaving doors wide open for another film.

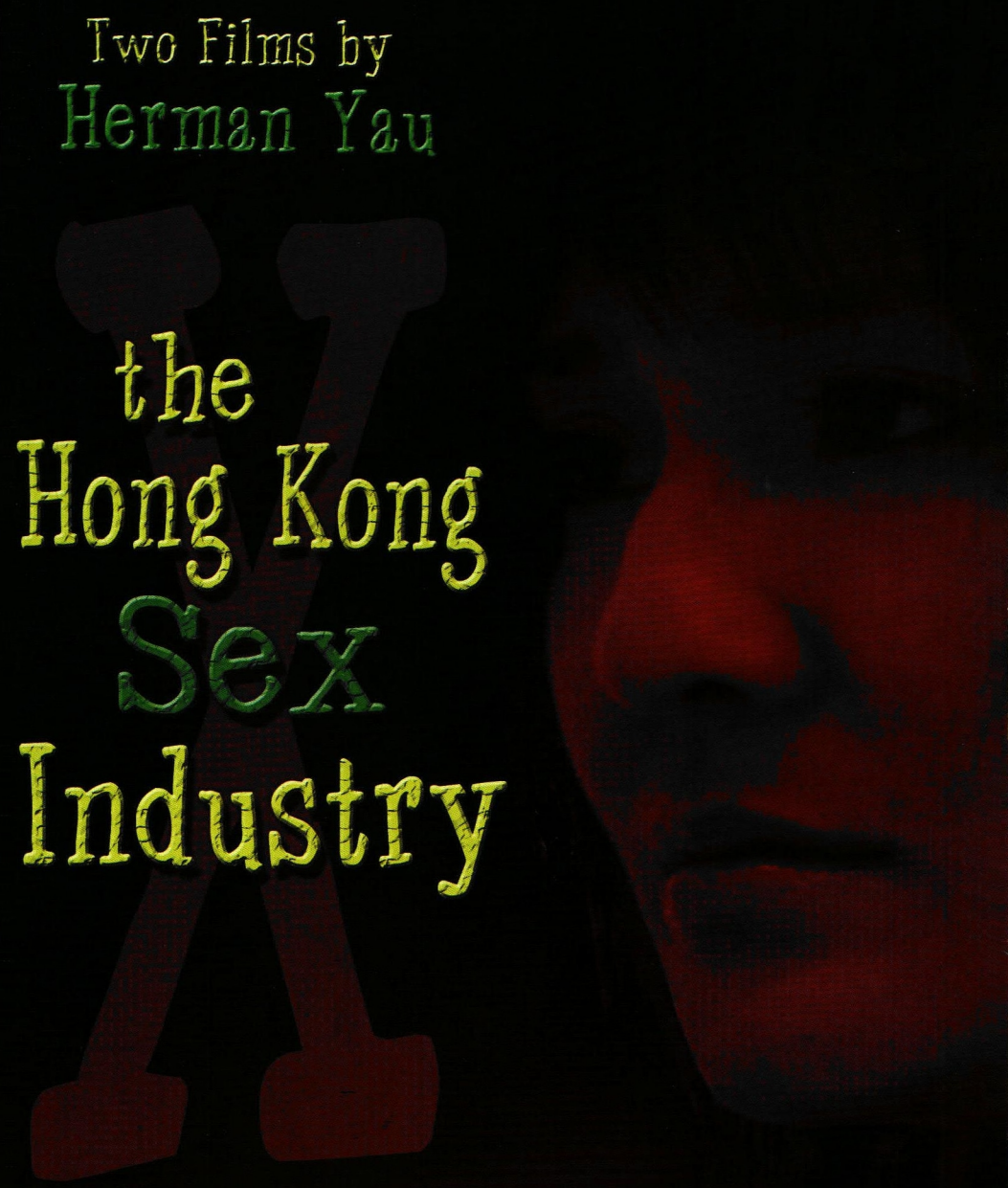


Stefan S is a Singapore-based film critic (IMDB.com as 'Nutshell Review') and can be read on TwitchFilm.com

Perhaps I should reserve my judgement of it until the next movie completes the story? So at this moment, we can still enjoy what Tony Jaa has prepared for action fans worldwide – a showcase that he's not just all about *Muay Thai*, but a bona fide action hero who's the real deal, crafting a myriad of incredible fight sequences that would still leave your mouth gaping wide open. ☑

Two Films by
Herman Yau

the Hong Kong Sex Industry



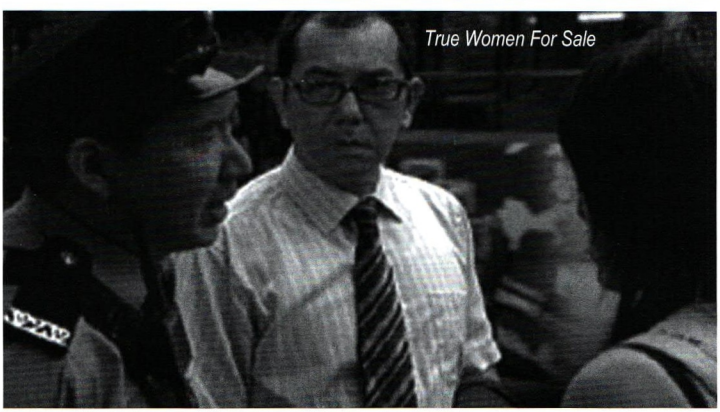
In 2000, investigative journalist **Yeeshan Yang** wrote a book on the Hong Kong sex industry, ***Whispers and Moans: Interviews with the men and women of Hong Kong's sex industry***, published in English during 2006. Attempting to reveal the human side of Hong Kong's bodily traffic in souls, Yang engaged in a detailed twelve-month research project interviewing nearly fifty hookers, heroin addicts, hostesses, male prostitutes, brothel owners, and Mainland hookers on weekly visas. The book attracted the attention of **Herman Yau Lai-to** who adapted it into two films - **Whispers and Moans** (2007) and **True Women for Sale** (2008), the latter featuring **Anthony Wong** after their recent re-teaming on **Over the Edge** (2006).

Although the subject matter has received many crime and Category 3 treatments, both these films deny viewers the usual voyeuristic pleasures involving unclad bodily parts, to say nothing of another version of *"Ebola! Ebola!"* Instead director and star are now older and collaborate on a different type of film far removed from the style of **Untold Story** (1993) and **Ebola Syndrome** (1996). Although Wong never appears in the first film, the second displays the same type of muted visual style and exploration of human dilemmas as its predecessor. Rather than supplying audiences with the usual spectacular displays of Category 3 sexuality and violence, Yau chooses instead to reproduce the same type of dispassionate quasi-journalistic style characteristic of his source material. However, **Whispers and Moans** acquired a Category 3 rating despite its very different visual style and lack of sex scenes.

Whispers and Moans

Yang Yee-shan's collaboration on the screenplay of both films with may explain their rather muted nature in comparison with Herman Yau's earlier work. Like all creative directors, Yau wishes to flex his intellectual muscles and explore a different type of style. Thus, while **Whispers and Moans** attempts to reproduce the documentary format of the original book in fictionalized recreations, **True Women for Sale** develops its own type of fictional narrative while never straying too far away from the realities affecting human situations.

Whispers and Moans chronicles a ten-day period during 2000 in the life of certain inhabitants of a Tsimshathui hostess club having a higher status than the one encompassing Temple Street hookers. The division into ten day segments follows the original Chinese title of the film, ***Ten Days of Conversations with Sex Workers***. However, business is business



True Women For Sale

Photos courtesy *Herman Lau, Hong Kong Star X Media* and *Mei Ah* (HK)

everywhere and the problems of financial success cast a shadow of gloom upon the two madams Coco (**Athena Chu**) and Jenny (**Candy Yu**). Although their girls seem better off than those Mainland Chinese competitors pounding the beat outside, **Whispers and Moans** implicitly suggests that global economic issues affecting the oldest profession may eventually result in the closure of this particular *"Cherry Orchard."* A Sikh in British major-domo uniform greets clients entering this particular realm of pleasure. His position subtly hints at the connections between imperialism, capitalism, and its post-capitalist successor in this new era of global economy. If the customers are always right, they can threaten to take business away from a well established Hong Kong house of ill-repute to more affordable areas of Mainland China whose own post-Maoist version of forbidden fruit may appeal more to male fantasies of the *"happy hooker"* far better than the Hong Kong version.

True Women For Sale

Despite the presence of well-known actresses such as Athena Chu and Candy Yu, **Whispers and Moans** operates more as an ensemble piece than star vehicle. It follows the structure of the original novel by delivering a detached examination of how undiscerning people exploit each other and feel sorry for their own personal predicaments. Chu's Madam Coco fears that she has contracted syphilis from a boyfriend who also conducted an affair with a transvestite prostitute (**Don Li**) that she may have been passed on to her daughter naturally unaware of mother's real profession. Young college girl Elsie (based on Yang herself) crusades for sex workers rights but finds her different type of missionary position foreign to a reluctant audience. Male gigolo Tony (**Patrick Tang**) sublimates his self-disgust by hiring prostitutes in Coco's establishment who he can verbally abuse to compensate for his loss of male control. He soon finds a soul mate in the sexually abused and confused Don Li character. Nana (**Mandy Chiang**) runs away from marriage fearing that her future wedding banquet may contain former customers who previously fulfilled their appetites in a much different way. Her sister Aida (**Monie Tung**) becomes a downwardly mobile drug addict forced to work on the streets.

Whispers and Moans engages in a different type of treatment of its subject matter. It avoids the pitfalls of Category 3 exploitation so viewers will be disappointed if they expect to see a lot of *"fur and early morning dew"* as the line in **Full Metal Jacket** goes. Neither is it a moral tract although Elsie's monologues come dangerously close almost as if she had walked off the set of a ***Ken Loach*** film. One reviewer percep-

Tony Williams, the head of Film Studies at So Illinois University in Carbondale, has written 12 years for ACC

tively referred to the film as "surprisingly idealistic" and this is one of its major problems. Camaraderie exists between madams and workers but off-screen hidden business forces operate that eventually close down the hostess club for financial reasons. Triad control of an industry dominating both Hong Kong and Mainland workers is never mentioned in the film and this is one of the glaring omissions also contained in the book. Where are the pimps? Despite the fact that Yang discovered women who worked voluntarily in this profession many others had no choice and the feminist-solidarity type melodramatic overtones existing within this very different type of women's picture can not conceal this fact. Although Coco and Nana obtain *"happy endings"* is this true for all these workers?

True Women for Sale focuses on different forms of bodily exploitation. Chung (**Prudence Lai**) works the streets to find extra cash to fix her teeth. She keeps pet chickens and has a makeshift local shrine in memory of those who perished in the avian flu scare. Since *"chicken"* is Hong Kong slang for prostitute (as well as the name of Anthony Wong's character in ***Ebola Syndrome***!), this is one many humorous touches making this film much lighter than its predecessor. Wong Lin-fa (**Race Wong**), Mainland immigrant widow of an older Hong Kong construction worker, arrives with her small child to collect a meager insurance payment hoping that she can produce a child in the region to gain resident status. The Chinese title of the film emphasizes this ironic form of commercialization – **I Don't Sell Body, I Sell Uterus**. Insurance salesman Lau Fu-Yi (**Anthony Wong**) links both personal narratives. Whenever he sees a prospective customer, Yau freeze-frames the image humorously revealing Fu-yi calculating the potential economic value of any future customer. As in **Whispers and Moans**, money rules! So too, do differences between China and HK. Chung and her girls face strong competition from Mainland babes. Their regular customers intend to move north to enjoy a more inviting piece of the action. Even Lau feels border temptation when he meets attractive Mainland Doctor Lee (**Jessey Meng**) who warns him that he may find himself marginalized there by more competitive insurance practices. While photojournalist Chi (**Sammy Leung**) takes an interest in Chung's dilemma for a human interest story, Fu-yi attempts to help Lin-fa despite her minimal economic value.

As Fu-yi, Anthony Wong delivers one of his best mature character performances. Like ***Clint Eastwood***, this actor never disappoints his audience and like his distinguished Hollywood counterpart has grown older and chooses roles more fitting to his age. If Eastwood can no longer play ***Dirty Harry*** or ***No Name***, Wong can not repeat his ***Untold Story/Ebola Syndrome*** performances. Instead, he develops the gentle side of his persona seen in **Teaching Sucks** (1997) to portray a person concealing humane sensitivity beneath his salesman exterior by helping a vulnerable single mother. However, the economic world of Hong Kong is not absent. When Lin-fa begins her labor on a Hong Kong bus, Fu-yi enlists the help of travelers who all come to her aid evoking those Hong Kong social values of older films such as **House of 72 Tenants**. Women immediately rush to help a mother who will soon bear twins. But Fu-yi utilizes this unexpected opportunity that makes him a ***"People's Hero"*** (title of a 1987 ***Ti Lung*** film) to pass around his business cards to get more clients! The bus sequence is one of the most delightful ones in the film combining humanitarian values with comedic undertones. It reveals another unexpected pleasure in the collaboration between Herman Yau and Anthony Wong.

Whispers and Moans and **True Women for Sale** deliver different, but glamorized, representations of marginalized aspects of Hong Kong life. While the first film resembles ***George Cukor***'s **The Women** (1939) transplanted to a different social world, **True Women for Sale** is more rewarding in its serious, but light-hearted, treatment of problems affecting losers in Hong Kong society. However, the *"true"* reality may be different outside cinema. ☑

Ric & Infamous

a column by the notorious RIC MEYERS

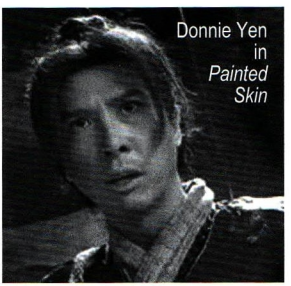
It was the best of three months, it was the worst of three months. An insider friend of mine tells me that a full seventy percent of Hong Kong film workers are unemployed, which is certainly reflected in the frequency and quality of the once vital industry's output.

Meanwhile, in this neck of the woods, distributors are plugging the leaks in their own bottom lines with cherrypicks from the struggling suppliers' backlogs. Where, once, beloved films were out of collectors' reach because of inflated prices, now many producers are happy to part with their once-overvalued babies at reasonable, even discount, rates.

Last issue I really only had **Red Cliff Part One** to consider. Now, there's a full half-dozen flicks to savor, not even counting Thailand's crazy-quilt attempt at a superhero movie, **Mercury Man**. Unlike **Chocolate**, which I dismissed last column (perhaps unfairly) because the wit and invention of its extended fights grated against the sadistic brutality of its unnecessarily remorseless plot, **Mercury Man** whisks up **Spider-Man**, **The Rock**, and **Born to Fight** into a frothing stew of endless climaxes, awkward actresses, and chintzy sfx that's fun if you're in the right *MST3K* mood.

Meanwhile, as ***Dragon Dynasty***, ***Media Blasters***, and ***AnimEigo*** nimbly present us with the opportunity to legally see films from the ***Shaw Brothers Studio*** library, the **Lone Wolf & Cub** TV series, and **Raizo Ichikawa** at his best in both the ***Shinobi no Mono*** and ***Son of Black Mass*** series (I have a serious psychological problem with calling it the odd, grafted-upon moniker: **Sleepy Eyes of Death**), I also have the happy opportunity to consider a plethora of new Asian films that have built up over the last twelve weeks, starting with a **Donnie Yen** double-feature.

The first of the *Donnies*, **Painted Skin**, can be quickly dispensed with. Although several filmmakers (even no less a personage as **King Hu**) have attempted to translate the joys of the original fantasy story, none have been able to capture its ethereal effect. And this



Donnie Yen in *Painted Skin*

Mercury Man

Besides contributing regularly to ACC, *Ric Meyers* is a columnist for *Inside Kung Fu;* he is an award winning novelist and scriptwriter

latest attempt, via producer/director **Gordon Chan**, is no exception.

Despite a handsome cast (including **Vicky Zhao Wei**) and sumptuous production values, this tale of a lovesick "fox spirit" who must munch on human hearts to remain in human form in order to psychotically, not to mention homicidally, stalk her unwilling amour is done-in not just by its unwieldy concept but by its special effects. That is not to say that its sfx are bad, it's just that everybody gets them … to the film's detriment.

Ip Man

Just as in **Gordon Chan**'s previous, disastrous, **The Medallion**, he showers wires and CGI on both the humanly and superhumanly powered, rendering their differences and confrontations uninvolving, uninteresting, and ultimately meaningless. Everybody tries hard, everything is very pretty — and Donnie, as the heroine's bro-in-law, gets in some good shots — but the final effect is pointless.

Next in the Donnie hit (and kick) parade is **Ip Man**, the retitled biopic of ***Bruce Lee***'s **Wing Chun sifu**. Originally called ***Yip Man*** (the more recognizable moniker of the title character), it was changed because the renowned arthouse director **Wong Kar-wai** was hoping to do his own biopic by that name … but more on him later. This one got out the (*Dragon Tiger*) gate first, directed by Donnie's go-to helmer of recent years, **Wilson Yip**. Together they created such Yen-centric showcases as **SPL** (aka ***Kill Zone***), **Flash Point**, and the afore-alluded-to **Dragon Tiger Gate**.

The result could have, and maybe should have, been titled *Onnie Yen* – not only avoiding any Wong Kar conflict but because it certainly seems to be more about Donnie's character, personality, and state-of-mind than the life of Master Yip. As it stands, it's also a well-appointed compendium of themes done first, and better, by **Jet Li** and company. Echoes of **Once Upon a Time in China**, **Fist of Legend**, and **Fearless** permeate the handsome production, and no amount of Donnie's superlative speed and skill can dissipate those shadows.

And there's certainly plenty of that on display. It's little wonder that Donnie gravitated to the production. As he plays him, Ip Man is saintly and superlative to a fault from the moment he's first glimpsed to the

Ip Man

Ashes of Time Redux

Legendary Assassin

moment he's last glimpsed. I suppose there's a certain comfort to be found in that regularity, but Donnie's seeming on-screen desire to be first, fast, fierce, and faultless at all times is a bit *Tom Cruisey* in effect.

Just about the only other fighters who are able to stand out from the scores of nameless, faceless folk Donnie plows through are **Terry Fan** and veteran Japanese actor **Ikeuchi Hiroyuki**, who takes on the *Billy Chow Fist of Legend* "General of Death" role. Anyway, in order to bend the story to Yen's will, liberties are taken in plot and character which lead to a certain amount of "huhs," "whas," and "yeah, rights."

Nonetheless, if you've come for the fights, and I recommend that you do, a good time can be had by all – if you're willing to pardon the intrusive presence of wires from time to time. But if wires there must be, no one does them better than Donnie's ol' SPL buddy **Sammo Hung**, who's credited as the choreographer here. As expected by anyone who knows Sammo's oeuvre, the many fights are predictably strong, sharp, and aggressive.

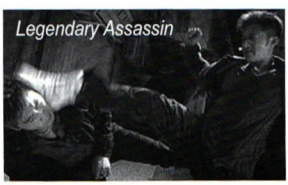
If you want to see how absolutely wonderful Donnie Yen is, enjoy **Ip Man**. If you want to learn about the character and skill of Yip Man, google away. Bottom line: come for the ego, stay for the fights.

And even if Wong Kar-wai doesn't do his own version of the story, *Sony Pictures Classics* have recently released the DVD of **Ashes of Time Redux**, the celebrated director's remastered reconsideration of his landmark 1994 rumination on life, love, longing, and lopping off limbs. According to the accompanying *"making of"* doc, the main difference between the original and this new version is the inclusion of seasonal title cards (*Spring, Summer, etc.*), giving the philosophic waxing some tangible shape, and the rerecording of the soundtrack, supplemented by string virtuoso **Yo-Yo Ma**.

By any edit, the beautifully filmed period piece – about an assassin *"agent"* realizing an inner truth through the people he brokers killings for – weaves an undeniable spell, no matter how hard I fought it. For the first half-hour, it seemed like the worst sort of self-conscious, pretentious claptrap. Wong is well known for going scriptless, and shaping some sort of final film in the editing room from the interminable improvisations

of his at-sea actors. But by the final fade-out, the ramblings of his exceptional cast (the late **Leslie Cheung**, **Maggie Cheung**, **Jacky Cheung**, **Brigitte Lin**, and both **Tony Leung**s) take wistful, effecting form within cinematographer's **Christopher Doyle**'s mesmerizing images.

The only thing sabotaged by the shifting sands of the desert locale is the kung-fu, coincidentally also choreographed by Sammo Hung, who admits in the doc that he was adrift in the desert for months on the project. Despite his yeoman work, all the action is filmed either sped up, slo-moed, or stutter-shot, as if the pure swordplay itself simply wasn't good enough somehow. But in the hands of an artist like Wong (or King Hu, who called the kung-fu of his film **A Touch of Zen** *"dancing"*) this can be forgiven, I suppose.


Legendary Assassin

Legendary Assassin

Champions

Champions

What is harder to forgive is the shabby cinematic treatment of a man who, had he been born twenty (or even ten) years earlier would already be one of the kings of kung-fu flicks. I'm talking about **Jacky Wu Jing**, of course, who showed great promise in ***Yuen Woo-ping***'s **Tai Chi II** and **Master of Taichi**, but, because of a great performance as a stone-cold killer in **SPL**, is now relegated to endless potboilers with either *"Lethal," "Fatal,"* or *"Assassin"* in the title. All can be reviewed exactly the same way: *"strong kung-fu, weak story."*

The latest, **Legendary Assassin**, is notable for Wu's first stab at directing (sharing the load with **Li Chung-chi**, who stunted along with Jacky in **Fatal Move**, **Fatal Contact**, and **Invisible Target**, among others). Just as Wu shared the same wushu school as Jet Li, his first helmer shares some of the same issues with Jet's one attempt at directing, **Born to Defense** – mainly an inability to tell a strong story straight.

Jacky also makes the traditional misstep so many other first-timers make. Although there can only be one Bruce Lee, novices' aspirations know no bounds, so while virtually none of them can pull it off in either looks or demeanor, they always cast themselves as the big boss, the coolest cat, the top dog, and just generally the greatest, sexiest, strongest thing since sliced bread.

Jacky plays the title character, who kills a mob boss, only to play hide 'n' seek with the man's minions as a typhoon threatens to smash the island they're all trapped on. Had he stuck to that lean, mean, possibly powerful plot and paid off the typhoon tease, Jacky might have made it work. But about three-quarters through an on-screen TV news program reports that the typhoon has changed direction!

So, sadly, does the movie, and once Jacky takes the first ferry off the island, the story spins out of control, leading to a ludicrous *Baby Cart*-esque climax where he takes on somewhere between fifty and a hundred conveniently unarmed extras in the rain to save a stunningly beautiful island policewoman, whose cop associates have magically disappeared.

It's a shame. By all rights, **Wu Jing** could, and should, have been a contender.

There's enough good acting, clever ideas, and smashing kung-fu in here to make it worth a look (not to mention the alluring presence of heroine **Celina Jade** and a welcome surprise cameo by **Kara My Young** ***Auntie Hui Ying-hung***). But, ultimately, Jacky's piling on is a lethally fatal combination. Strong kung-fu, but ... well, you know....

Thankfully **Champions**, an ambitious hunk of Chinese propaganda, has a strong story, but, unfortunately, too much of it. **Tsui Sui-ming**, who I thought of as *"Sammo-lite"* when I first glimpsed him in **Bury Me High** way back in 1991, has returned to produce, write, direct, and even co-choreograph this overripe, overwrought, and overstuffed saga about the 1936 Olympic martial arts demo team. Had he stuck to just them, things might have been easier to accept, but, instead, Tsui scoops up hunks from **My Young Auntie**, **Kids from Shaolin**, **Once Upon a Time in China**, **Chariots of Fire** (among others), and jams them in willy-nilly.

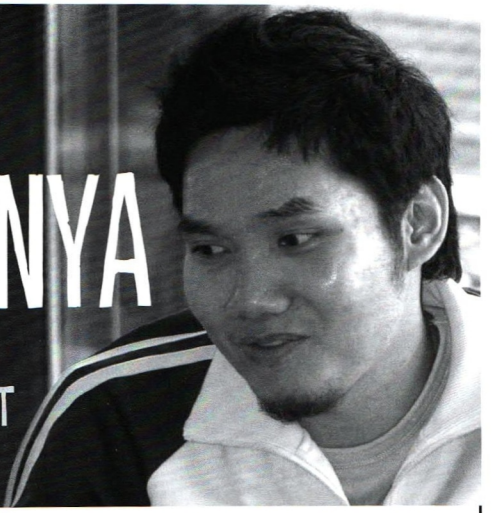
It doesn't help that he promotes long-time supporting player **Dicky Cheung** (**Last Hero in China**, **Bloody Brothers**) and apparently instructed him to do his "best (albeit incongruous and distracting)" ***Stephen Chow*** impersonation – following Dicky's involvement in the **Shaolin Soccer** TV rip-off, **Kung Fu Soccer**, four years prior. By the time Tsui tries to ladle on honest pathos near the end, it's too much, too late. **Champions** is interesting, colorful, and filled with plenty of authentic kung-fu. It's just a crying shame Tsui couldn't leave it at that.

Finally, this brings me to **Kuro-Obi**, a 2007 Japanese movie advertised at the time as *"Real Fight, Real Karate, Real Japan."* It's now been released on DVD by ***Media Blasters*** as **Black Belt** with the tagline: *"What is true power? What is true strength?"* Both descriptions are apt, since it plays like an inexorable Aesop's Fable. You ever hear the one about the sensei who tells his three students that whoever brings back the true meaning of karate will be his successor? Well, here you go.

It starts, *ala* **Ashes of Time**, a lot like ***Kim Ki-Duk***'s exceptional Korean film **Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring**. There's beautiful location filming and a lyrical, poetic approach. But then WWII-era militia intrude on the idyllic forest dojo, demanding possession and satisfaction. They get neither, but soon the sensei is dead and his trio of students attempt to understand his mantra of *"no fighting, no attacking."* One rejects it entirely, one takes it too much to heart, and the third observes as seemingly inescapable coincidences bring the two opposing students back together for a final full contact blowout.

Whether your credulity is merely strained, or snapped, depends upon how impressed you are by the karate performed by the stars – who are actually real practitioners of the first, fifth, and sixth dan. The over-all message and climactic revelation seem a tad muddled and unclear, but that's just par for the course for a pastime that promotes peace but teaches fighting. Suffice to say that if a **Black Belt** is what you're seeking, **Black Belt** makes fine viewing. ☑

PAWEEN PURIKITPANYA



INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
PATRICK VAN HAUWAERT
Photos by Nadine Raeman

About 30 minutes early I arrive at the IFFR Press desk for my meeting with **Paween Purikitpanya**, director of **The Body** *(Sob 19)* and part of **4BIA** (pronounce *Phobia*).

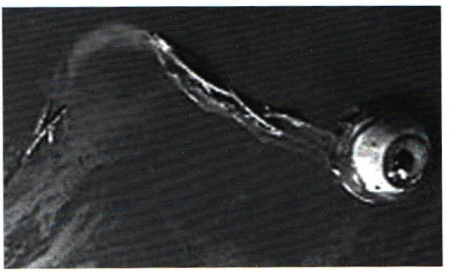
Much to my surprise the friendly press attaché points towards a table where I see a young Asian man and lady watching the people go by! As it turns out, I'm his very first interviewer from Europe and although he isn't nervous, it becomes clear that he takes some pride in this fact! Before we can actually start on the interview he politely asks my photographer Nadine to take some pictures (with his camera) of us both to take back home.

•

ACC: To be honest, little is known about you in the West. Please tell us about yourself...

PURIKITPANYA: Well I graduated with a Major in film and photography from Chulalongkorn University in Thailand

Pictures courtesy Phenomena Studios, Thailand and director Paween Purikitpanya



The Body

Patrick Van Hauwaert lives in Belgium where he runs a computer programming company. Mr Van Hauwaert is co-founder of the European movie website www.razorreel.be

*This interview with Thai director Paween Purikitpanya (**The Body** and **4BIA**) was conducted at the IFFF (International Fantastic Film Festival) January 2009*

(SIBMAS). I landed my first job as a director for music video's but I also worked on other things as well. I had to work on all kinds of music from Pop-music to Rock, even Heavy Metal. When my boss came with the proposal to make a movie, I gladly took the opportunity... with both hands.

ACC: Why the interest in becoming a director?

PURIKITPANYA: I always was interested in making movies! I had my first Mini Dvcam when I was twelve years old. I shot my father – disappearing – I made home movies with an UFO flying over! I was always busy filming everybody around me. So it appeared to me from a very young age that I would do something with films.

ACC: At that age, you were full of dreams, do you still have dreams about how your films should look. What about budgets. or censorship?

PURIKITPANYA: Thailand is not an easy country for emotions, What you say is not always what you should say! Sometimes we keep things to ourselves because of society morals. Like most other countries we have a censorship committee and these people are not necessarily movie enthusiasts! These people sometimes are very strict. When they decide to make a cut, they cut. As a director you have to find your way around this type of censorship.

*ACC: In **The Body** when I saw the demon for the first time I thought "This is Freddy Kruger mother"! Are you inspired by old B-horror movies?*

PURIKITPANYA: *(Laughing)* Yes, yes. I do love the B-movies and such! However the style of **The Body** was based on some very cheap comics that are available in Thailand. It was my idea to make the ghosts in the film resemble those in the comics as much as possible. Because the comics are so widely available and everyone could afford them, I knew people would – in turn – relate to the ghosts in my movie.

*ACC: And the plot of **The Body**, does it also come from a comic?*

PURIKITPANYA: No! The story is original, specially written by myself and **Chukiat Sakveerakul** (director of the Thai movie **13 Beloved**); but it is based on recent events in Thailand, where a doctor and an accomplice killed his wife. I used that idea and expanded it to a kind of ghost story.

ACC: Obviously the Asian horror scene boomed some years ago but you mix Asian Horror elements (i.e., long hair) with '80s B-Movies. The result is high on visuals...

PURIKITPANYA: My friends and I talked a lot about these things! We are so bored with the typical Asian elements – like the long hair – so we try to find other elements for our films. I, personally, am very much interested in CGI techniques, to create something stylish or to give it a comic book look. I put those influences in my horror films as a kind of test! Some audiences – like the Japanese – really love that action! They find it refreshing. Kinda new. But Thailand audiences tend to think horror should be pure, not with added elements!

ACC: Do you plan to stay in the horror genre or would you feel just as comfortable directing a comedy?

PURIKITPANYA: Actually I do love a good comedy, but it's quite hard to do. Comedy is about emotions and people's lives. I'm very much interested in horror and action films, but I think comedy is too hard for my personality. However if I run across a good script, I would love to try it, for sure. But ultimately, I think... if I went to a producer with a comedy he would say: stick with your ghosts and zombies *(laughing)*

ACC: What's the climate today for making films in Thailand? Better than before? or has nothing changed?

PURIKITPANYA: Sometimes it's easy and sometimes it's hard! But for my studio it is not always very easy. They are very much into quality but they don't ever want to take any risks! You need full approval from the producers to do anything. If you don't get it, nothing will happen. I also know... in some very big stu-

4BIA [Phobia]

The Body

The Body

dios, the producers [investors] decide how a film should look – not the director. They demand complete control; they want to make certain the end product with be appealing to both them and the public. But in all honesty some film companies are funded with *"dirty"* money! The Mafia uses the entertainment business for money laundrying. Often those guys are better to work for... they are willing to take risks and produce cheaper movies.

ACC: Both ***The Body*** *and your section of* ***4BIA*** *deal with avenging ghosts! Are ghosts part of daily life for the Thai people?*

PURIKITPANYA: The belief in ghosts runs quite deep in our tradition. We are born with it. It is a big influence to me. When we do something wrong in our life, we go to a temple to pray. We ask the spirits to take care of us! We believe in the afterlife. It's quite common to meet a friend or a neighbor who claims to have seen a ghost the day before.

ACC: Are you working on any new projects or do you have any plans for anything new?

PURIKITPANYA: **4BIA** was a huge hit in Thailand last year – it was the top movie of the year – and when we asked the producer about a sequel, he agreed immediately.

ACC: I have one final question for you: Forget about the money, what film would you like to remake?

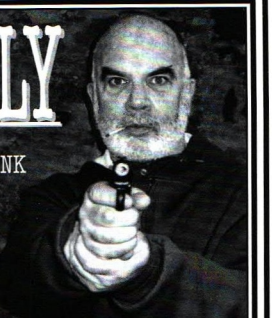
PURIKITPANYA: *(Thinking very Hard)* I love fantasy movies and I appreciate **Steven Spielberg**... maybe I would like to get my hands on **Hook**! Actually, I would love to take my audience to Never Never Land! ☑

TRASH TAKEN SERIOUSLY

SCHOLARLY REVIEWS OF EXPLOITATION · GUILTY PLEASURES & JUNK

by

Dr. Stan Glick



Sky Crawlers + More

Last December, I had the joy of seeing the New York premiere of **The Sky Crawlers**, the newest animation from master director **Mamoru Oshii** (***Ghost in the Shell***) at the Film Society of Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater. There didn't seem to be an empty seat in this terrific venue for the 7:00 show, which I attended, and there was a big line waiting for the other screening that night. So it seems that two full, or nearly full, houses got to enjoy a really terrific film.

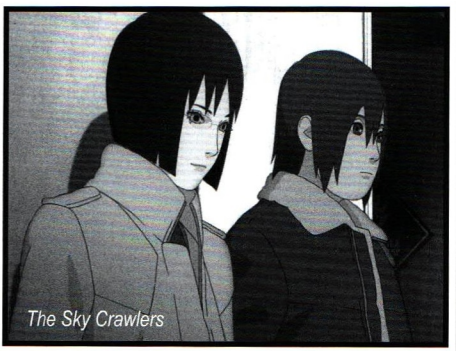
The Sky Crawlers is based on a series of books by **MORI Hiroshi**, who is well known for his mystery novels. *(Here I've written his name as I understand he insists it be done, family name first and all-in-caps.)* In an alternate reality, war as we know it has ceased to exist. It's been replaced by corporate-sponsored combat between rival air forces that serves as entertainment for the masses. The pilots are known as Kildren, adolescent youths who've been genetically engineered to never age and who seem to exist only to engage in combat.

The story's central character is Yuichi and we meet him as he is assigned to a new base and plane. His commander is Suito, another Kildren, and a rather strange, intimate relationship develops between the two of them. Yuichi also develops another relationship with a prostitute. A normal human, she and one of her co-workers are kind of fighter pilot groupies.

The attention to detail in the film is incredible, though not surprising since Oshii is directing.

Here are just two examples. As the opening credits are ending, the camera's viewpoint is from under the nose of a plane coming in for a landing. Between the camera and the ground are letters forming the credits for the director. The credit letters cast shadows on the ground, and the shadows actually become larger as the plane comes closer to the ground, just as they would if they were real objects. And during a dogfight early in the film, bullet casings can be seen coming out of the wing machine guns of a fighter!

In keeping with the alternate history motif, most of the planes are push-propeller types, like the original Wright Brothers aircraft. The one glaring exception is that of the ace enemy pilot known simply as *"The Teacher."* His plane resembles the legendary WWII P-51 Mustang fighter.



The Sky Crawlers

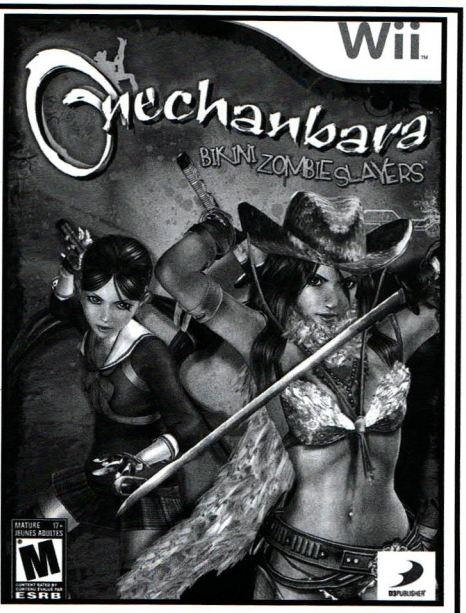
Stan Glick holds a Ph.D. in History and practices Tai Chi Chuan. An ACC writer since issue #27 and a columnist since issue #32, he now also maintains a website at http://asiancinefest.blogspot.com

Two of my favorite young Japanese actresses provide character voices for the film. **Rinko Kikuchi** (***Funky Forest: The First Contact*** and ***Babel***) does that of base commander Suito Kusanagi. **Chiaki Kuriyama** (***Kill Bill: Vol.1*** and ***Exte: Hair Extensions***) provides the voice for Mitsuya. (I believe that's the prostitute Yuichi hooks up with, but I'm not positive.)

In **The Sky Crawlers**, Oshii utilizes both 2-D and 3-D animation, the latter reserved primarily for the airplanes. He has created not only another visually stunning animation, but one that poses a number of intriguing questions about youth, memory, and the difficulties in forging connections, whether one is a Kildren or a normal human. It's a must-see for anime´ fans, and a should-see for everyone else. ★★★☆

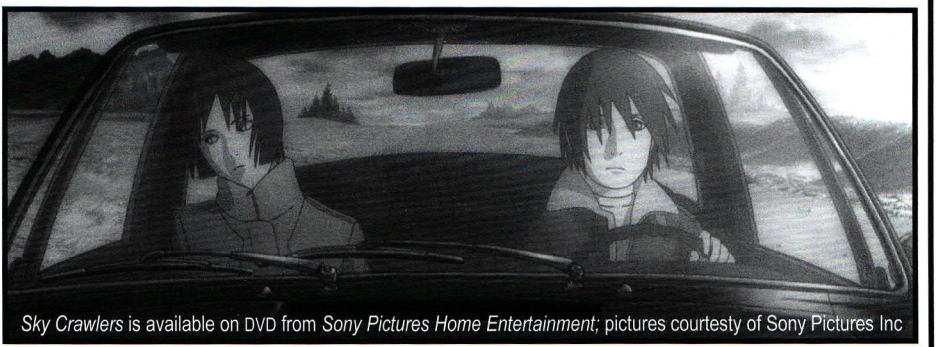
•

Last summer I saw the film **Chanbara Beauty** at the New York Asian Film Festival, where it had its international premiere. I put off talking about it (my recent columns were devoted to interviews) and now my editor tells me somebody is dealing with it in this issue [see page 55]. My dashed hopes were soon assuaged by a fortuitous development, namely the recent release of **Onechanbara: Bikini Zombie Slayers** for the ***Nintendo Wii*** video game system. (***Onechanbara: Bikini Samurai Squad*** was released the same day for the *Xbox 360*.)



So instead of writing about the movie, I'm going to write what I'm pretty sure is *Asian Cult Cinema*'s first video game review. Read on to learn my early impressions of what it's like to be a totally hot, bikini-wearin', slicin'-n-dicin' zombie slayer!

The game is a USA version of the Japanese video game upon which the movie was based. The game has two



Sky Crawlers is available on DVD from *Sony Pictures Home Entertainment*; pictures courtesty of Sony Pictures Inc

characters: Aya, who's the bikini babe, and her half-blooded sister Saki, who dresses in a schoolgirl uniform. (Some body could write a dissertation about the Japanese male's fixation on schoolgirl uniforms, if it hasn't been done already.) You not only play as either one, but get to switch from one to the other and back again during game play. This tag-team-like feature becomes important as the health meter of one starts to get dangerously low. When that happens you know it's time to change characters.

Both characters have at least three costumes in addition to the one you have at the start. These are unlocked by meeting certain game requirements. There's also at least one more playable character, named Reiko, though I haven't unlocked her yet. Information about all the unlockables is available on the web; I recommend gamefaqs.com.

In both the Playstation and Xbox systems, the player presses buttons on a controller that is held in both hands. The innovative *Wii* does employ buttons, but in addition its motion sensing wireless remote control translates movements in space into game movement on the screen. **Onechanbara**, like certain other games, also uses an accessory called the nunchuck (love it!), that attaches via a wired cord to the base of the main remote. Swinging the remote translates into sword movement; the nunchick is used for kicks. This makes for a very immersive and physical game experience.

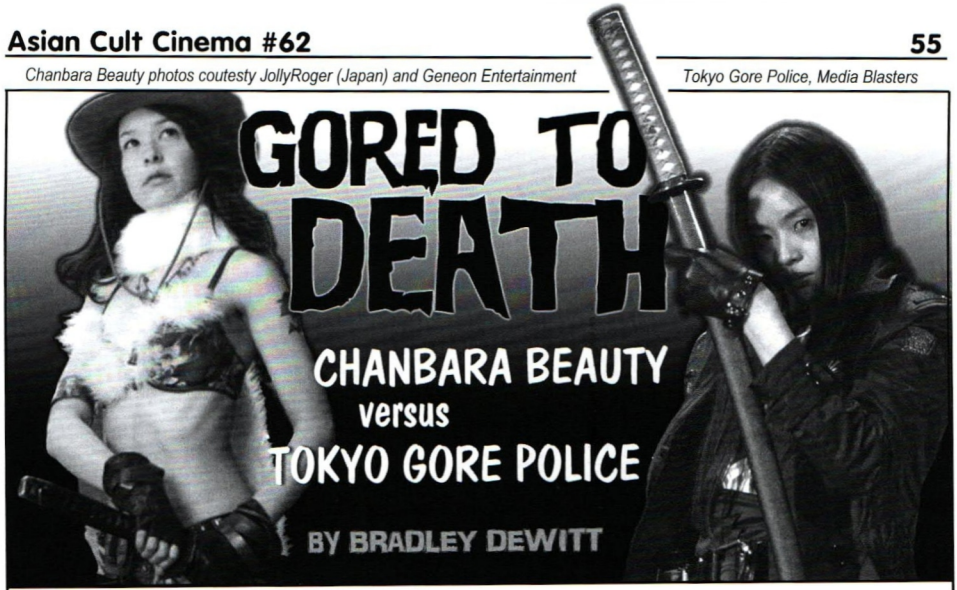
The graphics are quite decent and there's plenty of blood, gore and dismemberment to satisfy the most demanding player. Gameplay is easy to learn, though a bit on the repetitive side. Still there's enough diversity to keep things interesting. Aya, for example, can fight with either one or two swords. And besides the additional character(s) and costumes you can earn, you also get to allocate points your earn to improve each character in such areas as skill, vitality, power, and reach.

In pure play terms, **Onechanbara: Bikini Zombie Slayers** is a fairly good video game, meriting ★★☆. However, I think you also have to consider the fact that it's a discount game, costing $30 retail in New York vs. the normal $50 for a new *Wii* game. (The *Xbox* version similarly runs $40 vs. the regular $60.) In that sense it's a good bargain that deserves a solid ★★★ rating. And no matter how you slice it (sorry, couldn't resist putting it that way), it's a helluva lotta fun bein' a sexy, bikini-clad babe hackin' zombies to pieces. ☑

Onechanbara: the Game

Chanbara Beauty photos coutesty JollyRoger (Japan) and Geneon Entertainment

Tokyo Gore Police, Media Blasters



GORED TO DEATH

CHANBARA BEAUTY versus TOKYO GORE POLICE

BY BRADLEY DEWITT

At some recent crossroads in cinematic history – possibly around the time of **Ichi the Killer** – grotesque sights deemed at one point too violent to film became not only cliché, but a bloody screen behind which mediocre filmmakers could hide an appalling lack of originality.

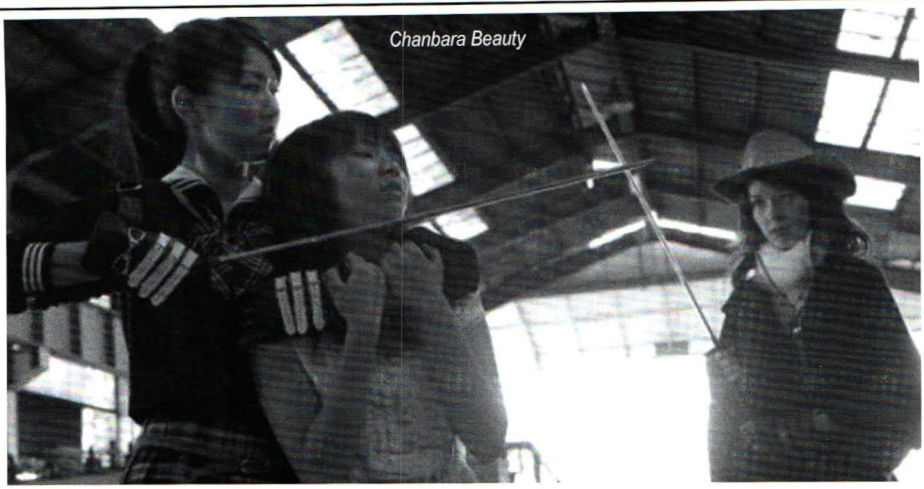
Honestly, is there anything that could, out of context, shock the jaded viewer of cult film? (*"Out of context"* because in the hands of a talented scriptwriter, cast, and director, anything can be shocking – a withering glance, for example, can and has been imbued with far more horror than any masked loser with a hammer drill.) But in terms of visceral violence, how to shock, thrill, and/or entertain an audience that, in recent years, has been exposed to everything from milk-spurting homicidal mothers to flambéed brains?

Chanbara Beauty

Tokyo Gore Police

Bradley DeWitt owns a small cafe in Gambier, Ohio. Besides contributing to various periodicals, he is currently at work on a book about the underappreciated Japanese director *Toshiharu Ikeda*.

Chanbara Beauty


Chanbara Beauty

What's next? Ax-wielding fetuses? Eyeballs that burn through their owner's cheekbones via corneal acid-urine? Penis stranglers? (That is, a penis that strangles, as opposed to a person who strangles penises, which undoubtedly has been done before.)* At some point, the desire to shock audiences runs antithetical to one's need to entertain them; yes, amputee midgets who kill with parasitic needles hidden beneath their nipples are different...but they're kind of silly, too.

Chanbara Beauty

Tokyo Gore Police and **Chanbara Beauty** are two surprisingly similar films in which the impressive quantity of violence hurts the quality of the finished project. Unlike the unrelenting though aptly titled **Tokyo Gore Police**, **Chanbara Beauty** at least has a coherent storyline and likeable characters, and thus works quite well as popcorn entertainment.

The world has been overrun by zombies, as the world is wont to do, and only one woman can defeat them: a sword-wielding, bikini-wearing angel of undead death, with a rose tattoo on her shoulder that consistently looks on the verge of peeling away. Her name is Aya, and if she sounds like a character from a video game, that's because she is; **Chanbara**

Tokyo Gore Police

** Editor's Note: Mr DeWitt may not be aware of it, but there is – amazing enough – a blaxploitation film* [called **Soul Vengeance**] *which features a penis that strangles.*

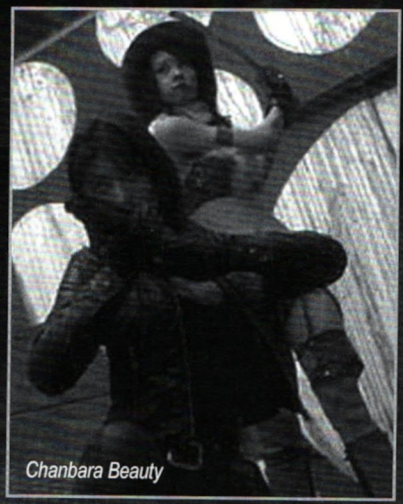
Tokyo Gore Police

Beauty, much like the **Resident Evil** movies, is based on a popular game. This origin can be seen in the structure of the movie as well, as Aya fights zombie after zombie, occasionally using *"special attacks"* such as a handy energy blast that can take out all the zombies within a fifteen-foot radius. In addition, Aya has to defeat the occasional zombie *"boss"* – which raises an interesting question: how does one become a zombie boss?

Chanbara Beauty

To the uneducated, zombies appear to be braindead collections of only moderately functional instinctual behavior, and yet: do they have a democratic process by which they elect their leader?

Does one have to be successful as a living person and demonstrate leadership abilities in order for it to carry over into the next *"life,"* or does one's new capacity as undead brain muncher afford them a tabula rosa of sorts, creating an exciting new realm of opportunities? In short, can a 42-year old, balding assistant manager at Rite-Aid have a second chance as an uber-zombie?


Chanbara Beauty

Food for thought.

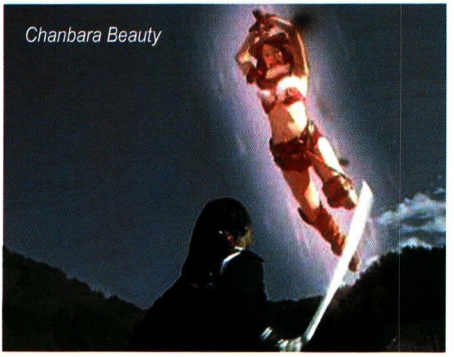
Aya joins forces with some other survivors on a quest to kill the doctor responsible for the whole apocalypse thing. This sounds like a pretty epic quest, but unfortunately the Japan of **Chanbara Beauty** seems to consist entirely of empty warehouses and the empty fields connecting them. This is the end-of-the-world on a budget, because the film's money is spent almost entirely on extremely hot actresses (wisely done) and F/X programmers (not so wisely done). Although blood drenches the screen with arterial showers, it is so cartoon-like and devoid of realism that the extended action scenes become distracting in a way, something you have to wade through to get to the good stuff, almost like the cut-scenes in a video game. In fact, the overuse of CGI in **Chanbara Beauty** is so criminal that everything looks as though it was generated via a keyboard and a group of sweaty, pimply computer nerds who think that a sword-wielding, bikini-clad girl is almost as good as the *Gears of War* expansion pack. Sword sparks, gun shots, blood splatters – all done via computer. The movie is in desperate need of one good squib.

Tokyo Gore Police, on the other hand, handles its gore the old-fashioned way: buckets and buckets of real fake blood. In this one, a beautiful, short-skirt wearing woman named Ruka must fight a series of increasingly hostile monsters, in preparation for a showdown with the evil doctor who started it all.

Sound familiar?

Tokyo Gore Police

Chanbara Beauty


Chanbara Beauty

The opening scene pretty much sets the tone. A SWAT team guns down the Japanese version of *Leatherface* on a rooftop, which turns him into a pissed off, chainsaw-throwing monster. Ruka must take a break from SLASHING HER OWN ARM WITH A RAZOR (don't ask) and defeat Leatherface, because she's just that cool. As Ruka does her thing, in slow motion (again: just that cool), Leatherface spurts so much red stuff over the camera that wiper blades would

Chanbara Beauty

Tokyo Gore Police

have been a welcome addition to the lens. It's extreme, all right – and clearly what the filmmaker was going for – but after the initial shock it grows old, really quick.

Ruka is an Engineer Hunter. Engineers are basically vicious killers with flesh-like keys altering the natural genetic code of their bodies; when you shoot them, their wounds become weapons. It's a neat concept, and indeed, the story of **Tokyo Gore Police** could possibly have been more engaging

Tokyo Gore Police

Tokyo Gore Police

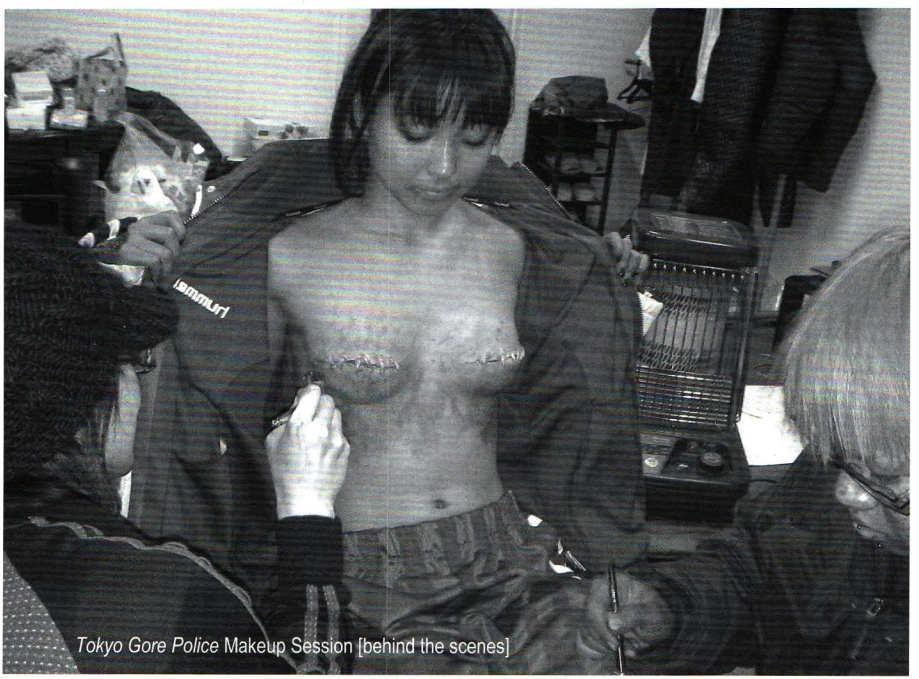
were it not so... gory. However, if you've seen Ruka fight one engineer you've seen her fight them all (although the man who fires the cerebellum bullets and the woman with the vaginal alligator jaws are pretty damn unique). Ruka is forced to become an engineer herself, leading to an extended finale in which she must use her newfound power to defeat the ultimate evil.

The influences of **Tokyo Gore Police** are not subtle: **Blade Runner** (the sci/fi noir lighting, an *"engineer"* as opposed to *"replicant"* hunter), **Tetsuo: The Iron Man** (the mutilation of the engineer's bodies, melding of organic and monstrous, specifically the...um... penis monster), and **Robocop** (Ruka's final more-than-human form, but also a series of commercials that appear periodically throughout the movie, including a *"cute"* arm cutter that all the cool schoolgirls are using, and a hilarious, over-the-top Wii-parody that's worth the price of the DVD on its own). Though it has its original moments, the story is pretty derivative, but if your *raison d'etre* is gore: welcome to Nirvana.

Neither **Chanbara Beauty** or **Tokyo Gore Police** are bad movies; both are enjoyable in their own right, and at least try to do something different. Instead of delivering the blood, brains, and half-naked women they anticipated the audience was there to see, the filmmakers might have cut down on the action scenes and given their characters more human dimensions – or made the action scenes less redundant.

And now for the big question: in a knockdown, all out battle, who would win – **Chanbara Beauty**'s Aya or **Tokyo Gore Police**'s Ruka. Aya has magical powers, but by the end of the movie Ruka is essentially a mutant, so it's a draw there. The actress who plays Aya, **Eri Otoguro**, is definitely hotter than the actress who plays Ruka (***Audition***'s **Eihi Shiina**), but Ms. Shiina makes a far more convincing badass. So: advantage Ruka. Aya wears a cowboy hat and bikini, whereas Ruka dons a tight mini-skirt and black boots, and even does a random little sexy dance after killing the Japanese Leatherface.

Game and match: Ruka. ☑



Tokyo Gore Police Makeup Session [behind the scenes]

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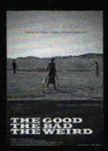

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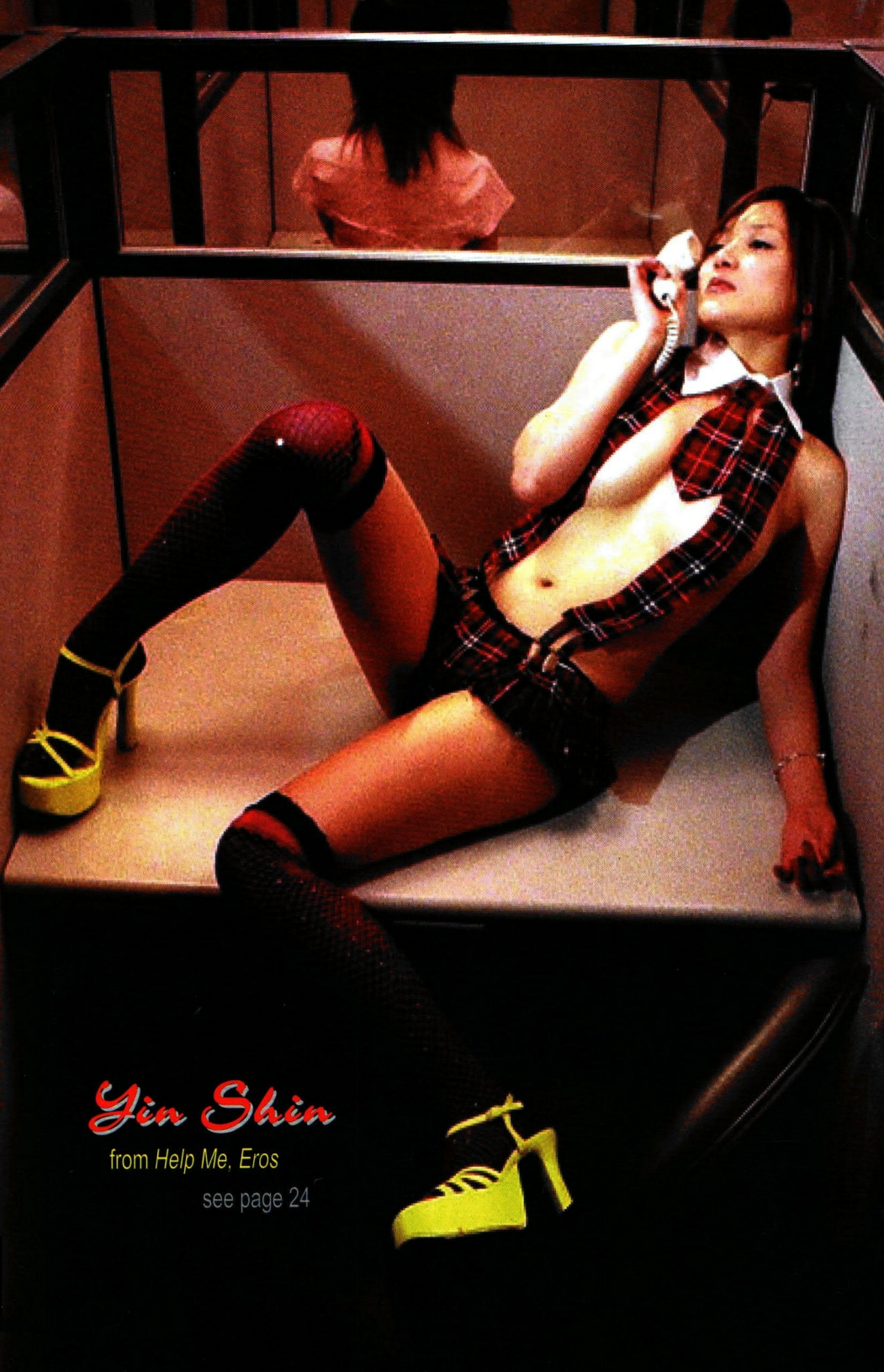

Yin Shin

from *Help Me, Eros*

see page 24